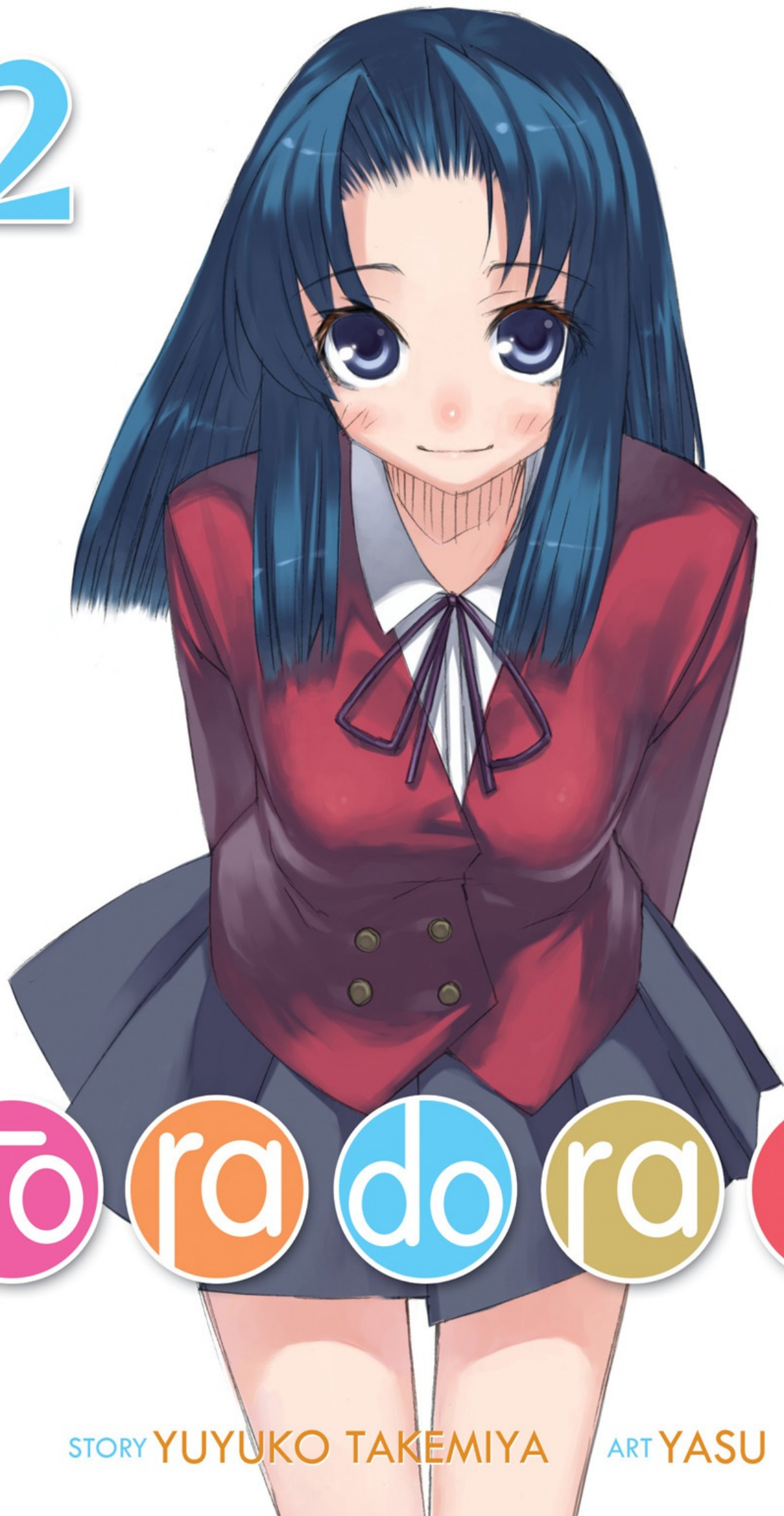


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STORY YUYUKO TAKEMIYA

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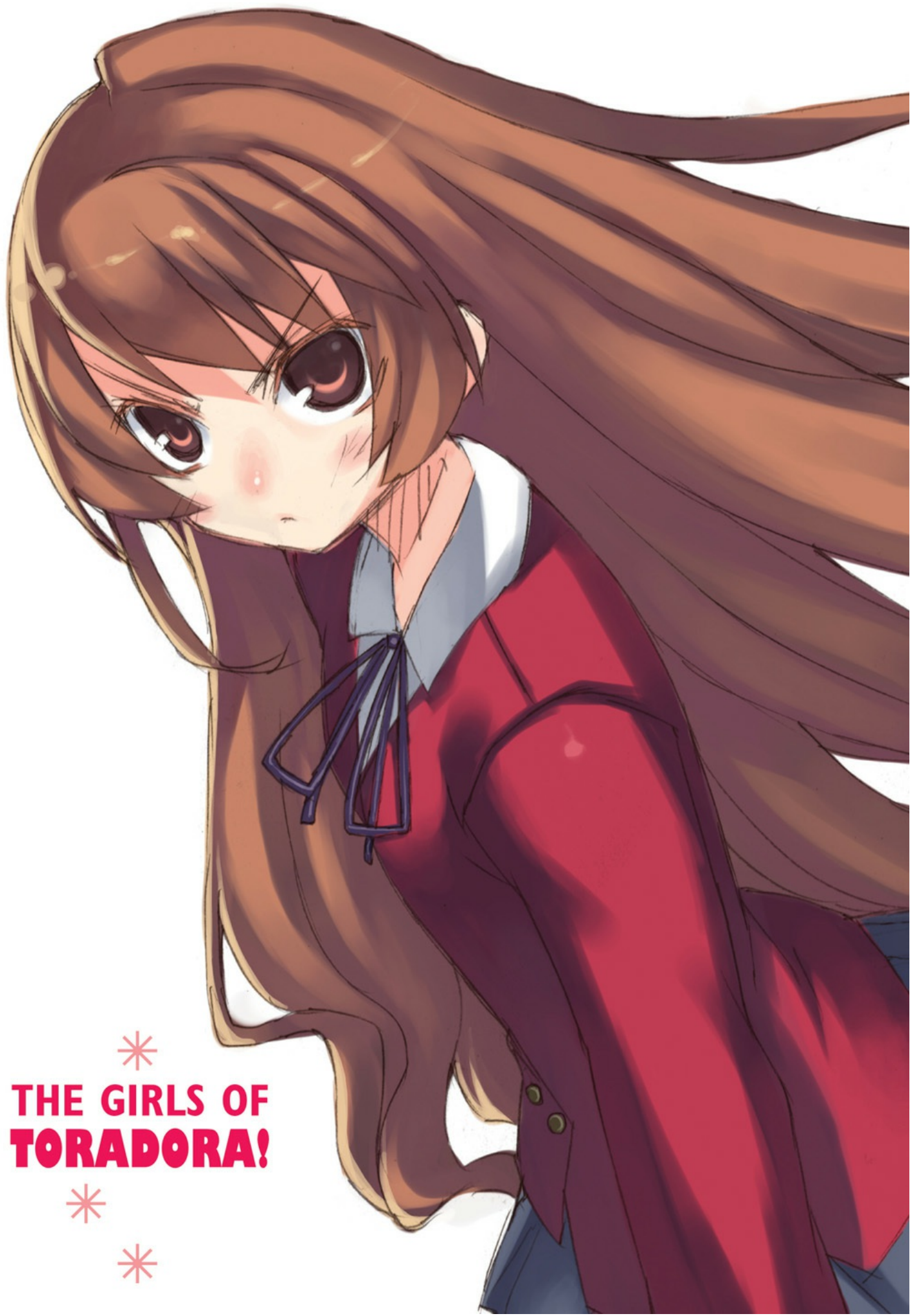
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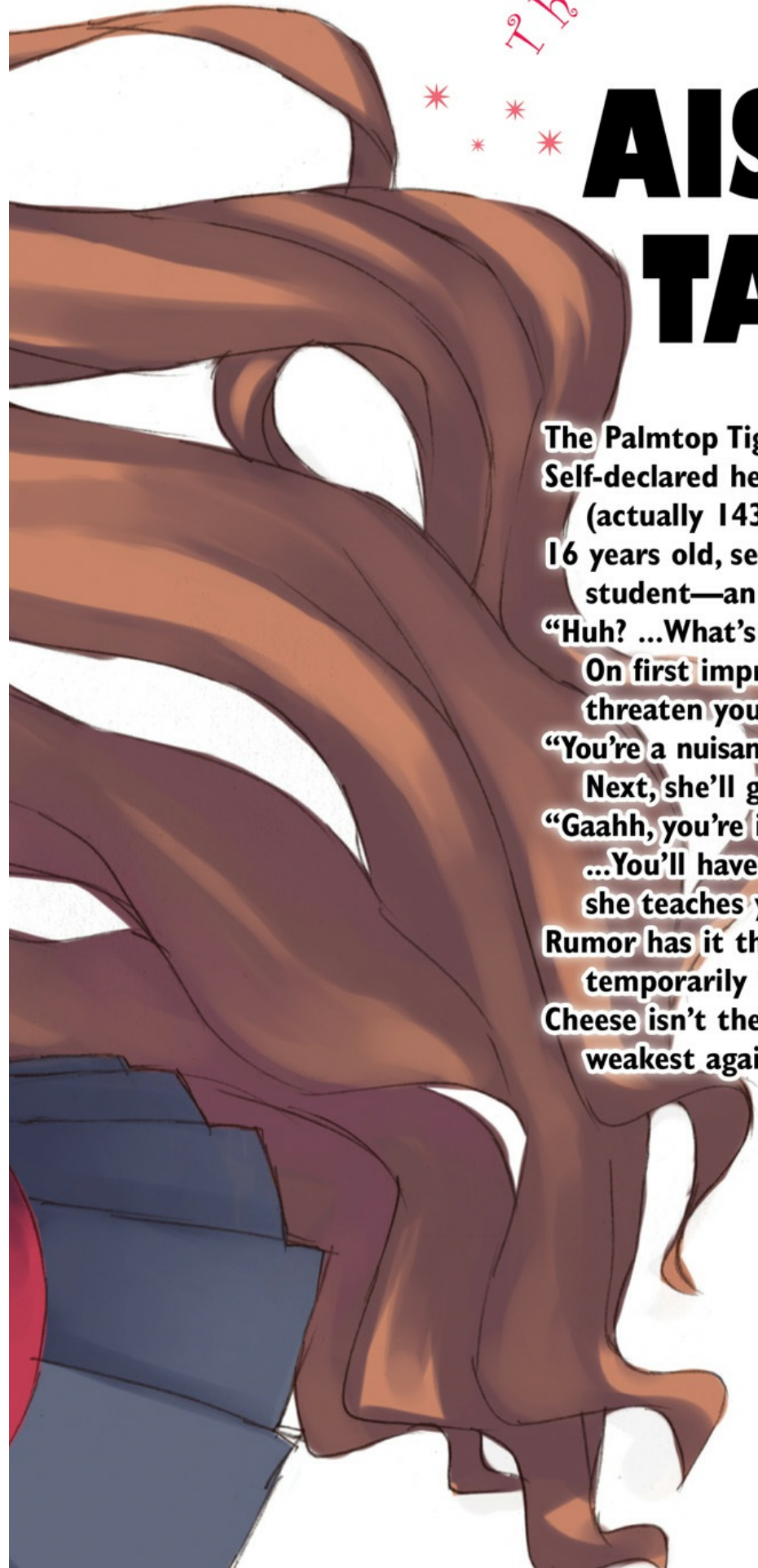
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*
**THE GIRLS OF
TORADORA!**





The Palmtop Tiger

AISAKA TAIGA

The Palmtop Tiger, aka Aisaka Taiga.

**Self-declared height: 145cm
(actually 143.6cm).**

**16 years old, second-year high school
student—an atomweight.**

“Huh? ...What’s with you?”

**On first impression, she’ll glare and
threaten you.**

“You’re a nuisance. Hurry up and move along.”

Next, she’ll give you a low, warning growl.

“Gaahh, you’re irritating! You better move!”

**...You’ll have about ten seconds before
she teaches you a lesson with her fists.**

**Rumor has it that you can pacify her
temporarily with dairy products.**

**Cheese isn’t the most effective, but she’s
weakest against desserts...supposedly.**

✱
**THE GIRLS OF
TORADORA!**



The gifted animal tamer Kushieda Minori. Born in April, 17 years old, also a second-year high school student.

She's captain of the girls' softball club, and opposing teams seem intimidated by how she manages to stay easygoing in the face of hardships.

Things she loves: "Fried food!" Things she adores: "Stewed food!"

Things she likes: "Stir-fried food!"

...But also steamed food, grilled food, dessert food... she's indiscriminately receptive.

Her single dislike: "Rotten food!" Her recent worry: "Wasted food!"

Currently, there are no rumors of her being in a relationship.





The super strange

**KUSHIEDA
MINORI**

The Third Girl Strikes!

KAWASHIMA AMI

165 cm; 45 kg. Occupation: model.

**Affiliation unknown, details unknown, friend or foe
unknown, nature unknown...**

**“Oh? Huh? Did you maybe need something from me?
Ahhh, my bad, I totally forgot, how embarrassing!
If I keep this up, everyone will call me oblivious!
Which is so untrue, because I’m tootally not
oblivious, you know. Everyone’s gotten the
wrong idea.”**

...Repeat, nature unknown. Approach with caution.



*
**THE GIRLS OF
TORADORA!**



**“...Jeez, they’re all just weird people.
Hey, you guys, take care when you
open these pages. By the way, I’m...
well, let’s take it a step at a time.”**

**“...President, you’re more than
weird enough yourself.”**



TORADORA! Vol. 2

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PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-626928-61-9

Printed in Canada

First Printing: August 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Toradora 2

BY
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ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasu



Seven Seas Entertainment

ToC

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Chapter 1

It was the last day of Japan's mega-long holiday: Golden Week.

"You're free, right?"

The time was one o'clock in the afternoon.

"Hey, you're not doing anything, right?"

The Takasu residence was dim, as if the fair weather outside were a lie. South of the wide-open window, the neighboring condominium's fence looked nearly close enough to touch. The bright natural light of the early summer sun couldn't even hope to get past it.

Nonetheless, the inside of the room was methodically well kept. The entire place had been thoroughly cleaned, and though it was small, a bit of clever planning miraculously kept the place habitable. That marvelous comfort and livability were the fruits of Ryuuji's housekeeping skills. The only son of the household had his back to the living room while he cleaned the kitchen after lunch.

"Are you listening?"

No one answered his question, much less thanked him for his work.

Ryuuji stopped doing the dishes for a moment and shot an overly-sharp glare back at the muslin-colored lump sprawled on the floor. That lump lay in a messy heap beside the low dining table, her chin propped up on a folded cushion. She stuck her finger through the bars of the birdcage next to her, staring, spaced out.

A yellow parakeet—Inko-chan—grunted as it gnawed on the tip of the intruding finger. She seemed to be savoring the experience. Inko-chan's ugliness was her most charming attribute. Her mulberry-colored beak opened earnestly wide, and her little tongue, licking at the intruding finger, was the same color as a cow's...if the cow's had gone rotten, maybe. Her eyes also happened to be wide open, the whites so prominent that she looked just about ready to keel over. Her eyelids spasmed with a dangerous, bird-like delight that

humans could never fathom. If this went on, Ryuuji was going to have trouble looking at it, and he *owned* the bird.

“...Taiga. Make Inko-chan stop doing that. She’s acting strange.”

“...Huh? Oh, you’re right.”

Finally turning around, the muslin-colored lump—Aisaka Taiga—returned to her senses and pulled her finger from the birdcage. Or she tried to, anyway.

“Huh? I’m stuck.”

...*You klutz*. Ryuuji could only sigh as he saw her tilt her head.

“What do you think you’re doing just standing around and sighing? I think I might really be stuck!”

She got up and sat her petite body straight down on the tatami mat. Growling in displeasure, Taiga held the birdcage with one hand and made an earnest attempt to pull her finger out from between the bars. Not about to let go, Inko-chan redoubled her efforts and latched onto Taiga’s fingertip even harder.

“Ah...she’s strong...!”

Taiga’s swaying, waist-length hair was softly tangled, the color of chestnut touched by smoke. Her delicate body was enveloped in a fluffy dress piled with lace. Paired with her figure, Ryuuji thought the unbleached overskirt left her with an elegantly volumized and cute— “Hey, Ryuuji. What are you just standing there staring for? Your bird is misbehaving, so hurry up and do something about it, you...you...Y.S.D.!”

“Why Ess Dee?”

“‘You Stupid Dog.’ I was trying to soften it for you. Aren’t you grateful?”

Well, that came out of nowhere. He lost all will to retort.

If it weren’t for the sharp tongue, Taiga would have been like a living French doll. Her eyes were like sparkling jewels, her pale lips like rosebuds; her sweet, refined features were as dangerous as a trap drenched in condensed milk. But she had one problem.

“UGH! I’m so *over* this. Hmph.”

Creak. The birdcage started to warp.

Unfortunately, Aisaka was born under the star of the ferocious and brutally violent tiger. Her nickname was the “Palmtop Tiger.” Even if she was practically small enough to hold in one hand, her ferocity could only be compared to that very particular feline.

That said, the power of the look Ryuuji was giving her couldn’t be beat, either.

From his still-growing height, his overly-sharp gaze peeked from between the gaps in his long bangs. Those incredible, hardened eyes glinted dangerously. Even though he wasn’t *physically* stronger than most people, the aura emanating from his body was dangerous, like the darkness overflowing from the soul of a youth about to snap.

But...

“Hey, hey, hey, don’t break it! No! Gently!”

...In Ryuuji’s case, the only dangerous thing about him was his appearance. In order to protect his pet’s home from the tiger, he kneeled next to Taiga, wiping his wet hands. He tried pulling on the birdcage to take it away, but...

“Owowowowowow!”

“Oh, sorry!”

He leaped back at Taiga’s shriek and left her finger stuck in the cage. Maybe it was surprise at that cry, or a result of being provoked, but—*WHOP!*—Inko-chan sharply stabbed at the small gap between Taiga’s flesh and fingernail.

“Oooooow!”

Taiga shrieked even harder...and her finger popped right out of the cage’s gap. Maybe all that pain was good for something.

Taiga held her finger in speechless agony atop the tatami for several seconds.

“...That hurt... why you...!” She raised her head and turned her eyes—glistening from faint tears, a gleam like an assassin’s sharp knives—to Inko-chan.

The bird surely understood that it had made a terrible, terrible mistake. “...

Squaa-wa-wak?” Inko-chan’s whole body trembled as she looked up at Taiga. Several feathers came fluttering down, a consequence of sheer stress.

Ryuuji quickly held the birdcage to his chest. “Ahh! Inko-chan’s *balding!* Keep it together, girl; get a hold of yourself! If you get any uglier, I don’t know if we could stand to keep you around. Let’s put you somewhere safe—who knows what she might do to you...?”

Then Taiga stood up, too. “Are you for real, Ryuuji? It’s not like I’d seriously do something to a parakeet.”

“Then what’s with the clenched fists?!”

“They’re to punish *you!*”

Cornering Ryuuji against the wall, she curled her small hands into *solid* fists.

“What did I do?!”

“Look at my finger! It hurts!”

“How’s that my fault?!”

Taiga circled around and around the room, chasing after Ryuuji, who still held the birdcage.

“Gyhhh!”

Bam. Taiga face-planted onto the tatami.

Something white had slid out from the sliding door, which had been left partially ajar.

“...Why are you poking out here?” Ryuuji still wore a scowl, one that made him look like he might start swinging a knife around at a moment’s notice. He set down the birdcage to investigate.

It was his mother’s bare leg. Ryuuji wasn’t angry, really—just puzzled.

With her foot poking out between the sliding doors that partitioned her room, the matriarch Yasuko was in a deep sleep. She kept busy working as an entertainer at the town’s one and only hostess bar, Bishamon Heaven. True to form, she’d come home drunk that morning at six.

“Oh. Did we wake her up?”

Still laying right where she'd fallen, the Palmtop Tiger—that human trifecta of stubbornness, wickedness, and self-centeredness—lowered her voice. She told the family breadwinner: “You did good, kid. You deserve a break. Go on back to sleep.”

“No, no, she's still asleep.”

Of course, Ryuuji also lowered his voice, and was pushing the protruding bare leg back into the bedroom. Then...

“Nn...nnngh...”

There was a childlike, nasally sound. And...

“...Waaaaaahh!”

“Yeah? What? What's wrong?”

The body attached to the bare leg suddenly broke into a wail. Wearing her son's old middle school PE shorts and a thin T-shirt that showed the black lace of her bra, she flailed her arms and legs. She rubbed at her white cheeks with the back of her hands and flopped on top of the futon. Alarmingly, she was thirty-three years old this year, and her pride was her giant, F-cup breasts.

“I-It smells like omurice! Ryu-chan and Taiga-chan were eating while Ya-chan was sleeping! Waaaahhh!”

“Come on, it's not like that. I left a serving for you. It's all wrapped up in the kitchen. I'll stick it in the fridge on my way out, so just zap it in the micro whenever you get up.”

“...Did you write Y-A-S-U-C-O on it in ketchup?”

“Nope. It would have gotten messed up when I wrapped it, right? And it's Y-A-S-UK-O.”

“Uggghh... Your mother is still *very* sleepy, so no English lessons, please...”



Once again, Yasuko flopped onto her pillow. The less-than-perfect single mother immediately started breathing shallowly in her sleep. Even though she couldn't do chores, she did earn enough money for them to subsist off of. She was a kind and gentle mother, but her head had a few screws loose...and her son Ryuuji spent his days watching out for where she dropped them. Incidentally, according to Yasuko, when she was in her third year of middle school...

"I was in the lower seventeenth percentile for math. My homeroom teacher didn't know what to say, so he just stared at me until the sun went down."

But for the time being, anyway, the Takasu household hadn't gone bankrupt. They held up okay. The breadwinner was Yasuko, the one in charge of the household was Ryuuji, the pet was Inko-chan, and lately, they'd had one extra fixture around the house...

"Oww...I scraped my chin. Ugh, this place is just way too small. Hey, Ryuuji, do you want to have sashimi for dinner tonight? It's completely unrelated, but after falling down just now, I was thinking I could go for some raw fish."

Ryuuji stared at her raw, red chin. "...Is it really completely unrelated...?"

"What? Am I not allowed to eat sashimi?" Rubbing her chin, she stared at Ryuuji with both big eyes—she was one violent-tempered tiger.

"The Super Yontoku mart in front of the station has a limited time sale on tuna sashimi starting at five o'clock. I think."

"I want to go with you when you buy it, so come get me at four forty-five. I'm going home."

"Huh, you're going home?"

"You're complaining?"

Although Taiga wasn't living with them, on their days off, they were together during the day. They were together at night. They were together while shopping. They had an unwritten rule that she wouldn't stay overnight, but it wasn't uncommon for them to doze off after dinner and keep each other company late into the night. They were pretty much living together, but they

weren't *involved*, not as a couple, anyway. But as Taiga stood up, Ryuuji dawdled, lingering behind her.

"Why're you going home? You never have anything to do. You're free, right? Can't you stay over longer?"

He was pretty much asking her to spend more time with him, even if it was for a short while. Taiga flipped her hair dismissively and turned a cold gaze on him. "*You're* the one who doesn't have anything to do. I have some very important laundry to get done. The weather's perfect for it."

"Your laundry? All you have to do is press a button. Your machine's a washer-dryer combo, too, so it's not like you have to line-dry it. So don't just tell me you're going home for *that*."

Tsk. Taiga clicked her tongue in frustration. She aimed a deadly stare at the scary-faced guy who had walked around in front of her. "Ugh! Your whining is killing me! Just what are you trying to say? If you want to say something, just spit it out!"

Ryuuji fidgeted and mumbled, "...W-would you wanna maybe go with me to that one sit-down restaurant...?"

"Again?!"

Instantly, Taiga's face contorted with irritation. But Ryuuji didn't back down.

"It's not like it's a huge favor or anything. I can't go *alone*! And today you practically begged me for omurice, so I made it, and... come to think of it. Do you realize how much trouble you give me all the time over Kitamura? Why don't you help *me* out every once in a while, huh? You could at least do that much!"

"Gawd, you're so loud! Shut up, or I'll tear it off!"

"Tear what off?!"

As their fruitless shouting contest ground on, a noise echoed from the other side of the sliding door. "Ugh, ugggh, uuugggghhh...!" Yasuko groaned, in the throes of a hangover.

They were silent for a moment.

“...I guess I’ll go. If you *insist*. Ugh.”

In the end, Taiga was the one who caved.

“It’s on you, got it? And you’re buying me a magazine. Going through the hassle of talking to you is like...” She made a spitting noise off to one side. “... That.”

Taiga had an especially eloquent way of expressing her mood.

But Ryuuji took it without a word of complaint, a masculine “yeah” his only response. If it got her to go with him to the diner, he figured expenses like that were no big deal.

After all, this was *that* restaurant.

“There you go! One order served up!”

Thump. A yogurt parfait was planted right before Taiga’s eyes, so large she couldn’t see past it.

“This is just between you and me, but this one’s a Taiga special with HEAPS of extra vanilla ice cream. Hide it from all the other customers while you eat, ‘kay?”

“Are you sure, Minorin? Won’t you get in trouble with your boss?”

“Naaahh, it’s fine! You pretty much came in every day this break. We’ve gotta give you at least this much service! Takasu-kun, do you want anything, too? I recommend the matcha parfait or, if sweet’s not your thing, then maybe the french fries. I’ll give you tons—I’ll pile ‘em up real good!”

“Oh, no, I...” *It’s okay, it’s okay.* Ryuuji waved his hand in front of his face, unable to even look up from his self-serve coffee. Actually, he couldn’t even open his eyes to start with.

It was just too bright.

She was too bright—Kushieda Minori in her waitress uniform.

Her hair was in a seductive ponytail, the slender nape of her neck in full and glorious view. The pale orange dress and white mini-apron were just too cute a

uniform. Her chest, which normally didn't attract much attention, gently lifted the thin fabric. Her cheeks were aglow with her smile, possessing the allure of a still-ripening peach.

Looking down to hide his face, which was quickly growing hot, Ryuuji desperately evaded the gaze of his unrequited love of nearly one year. He wanted to look, but he wouldn't look—no—he *couldn't* look.

Such was the ambivalence of a boy in love.

"Weeell, can you two *really* say that you're not dating when you've been coming to eat here together nearly every day all break? You're a regular pair of lovebirds!"

At that, they both had just one thing to say to Minori, which was...

"No way."

"No way."

Even their breath was in sync as Ryuuji and Taiga shook their heads.

"Is that sooo?"

"You bet."

Taiga narrowed her eyes, as though exasperated. Then she turned an extremely cheerful gaze up at her friend, not a drop of ill will to be found within it. "Minorin, you've been here day in and day out working all break long, but you're not going out with the manager or that old guy in the kitchen, are you? It's the same for us. How can you assume we're dating just because we're here together?"

"You're the kind of kid that *would* jump to that conclusion."

"Well, the whole you-guys-are-dating thing is that level of bogus."

Takasu and Aisaka's official statement was currently that they were not dating. Minori was the one who persisted in mixing her groundless suspicions about their relationship into her jokes whenever the chance arose.

For Ryuuji, who was secretly in love with Minori, that was the cruelest joke of all.

“Okay, okay, say no more, grandpa.”

“Who are you calling grandpa?”

“I’m not with the manager, and not with the shabu-shabu store manager I work for every other evening, or the karaoke manager, or the manager for the convenience store I work at early mornings. In the same way, Taiga, you and Takasu-kun aren’t together. That good enough? Well then, I gotta get back to work.”

“...Just how many part-time jobs have you got?” Ryuuji let those words slip out without thinking. *But hey, it sounded natural, at least. Go me.*

“Hey, even with all of that, I’m restraining myself, y’know! We still have club meetings even during break, right? And as president, I can’t afford a single day off!”

Ryuuji was left at a loss for words at her reply.

Taiga replied for him. “He’s saying you’re working way too much. Are you making all this money because there’s something you really want?”

“I have extra time, so I gotta put it to use. We’re all the stars of our own stories, right? Mine’s the *X-tra Work Files!*”

“...Say what?”

“Or maybe *The Employee Strikes Back!* Well, I’ll be back, okay?”

Leaving only those cryptic words behind, Minori dashed off to the kitchen. Who knew she was such a workaholic? Their eyes followed her exit.

“That’s some work ethic... she isn’t just cute, she’s serious. Completely unlike a certain somebody I know.”

“...Meaning?”

“You wake up in the afternoon, come by with your hair and clothes still messed up, get lunch, and then just lay around watching TV, eventually eat dinner, laze around all night, and then just go home. You’re lazy.”

Taiga turned up her chin with the utmost hauteur, aiming her parfait spoon across the table. “We’re on break, so taking it easy is A-okay. And it’s not like

you're that different. You're completely missing the important part. *I'm* the one always making the effort to come over here with you, aren't I? And on top of that—okay, first of all—”

“Gah...! You flicked ice cream in my eye!”

“The reason why I have nothing to do is *you*, Ryuuji. Do you get that? Huh?” Taiga spoke arrogantly. Rather than anger, the color of scorn flooded her large, shimmering eyes. “You’ve got it real good. You can count on me to help you see the person you like, but I don’t have a ‘me’ for myself. I don’t have a kind-hearted person like me to cheer for *my* love life.”

“...Man, do you think you could beat around the bush a little more? It’s not my fault that you couldn’t meet Kitamura during break. I helped you like I was supposed to.”

“...”

“Don’t just ignore me when we’re having a conversation!”

“Shut up.”

After speaking her mind, Taiga lapsed into sullen silence. She dropped her eyes to the women’s magazine she had bought at a bookstore on the way there. Ryuuji didn’t like it, but it wasn’t like there was a lot he could do. He could only drown his indignation in black coffee.

The Kitamura situation absolutely wasn’t his fault.

He recalled what had happened, early in the afternoon, on the first day of their break.

Ryuuji, bowing to Taiga’s endless pestering, had made a phone call to his close friend Kitamura—Taiga’s unrequited love. Knowing that the softball club Kitamura and Minori were members of had about three days off during the break, Taiga wanted Ryuuji to find out what Kitamura’s plans were for that time. Although Taiga didn’t have the courage to invite Kitamura out herself, she wanted to have Ryuuji make plans to meet Kitamura, and then, under the pretense of a coincidence, run into them. She had concocted that pitiful plan.

But the blunt reply that came over the phone (while Taiga stood beside Ryuuji

in a cold sweat) was: “Nope! Sorry! I wanted to hang out for a day, too, but between student council and stuff I have to do at home, my schedule is completely booked!” No matter how you looked at it, it was just bad timing. There wasn’t any room to blame Ryuuji.

“Even if you did see him, you’d just go all tongue-tied anyway.”

“...”

Taiga looked up. She didn’t make a sound, or change her expression, as she whispered using only the movement of her lips...

Go. To. Hell.

“...Go to hell? What, are you going to push me in?”

“You heard that? You have good ears.” Taiga snorted with the coldest scorn, gazing at Ryuuji with an expression more devil than tiger.

In times like these, Ryuuji couldn’t help but think, despite himself: *Why am I practically living with her—with someone like this, who belittles me and looks down on me...?*

“Ah!”

His thoughts were interrupted by Taiga’s exclamation.

“Ugghh! What are you doing, you klutz?!”

Still holding his head in one hand, Ryuuji quickly grabbed a tissue and got up to kneel like a proper manservant beside Taiga’s sofa chair. A drop of blueberry sauce had dripped out of her mouth and onto the lap of her dress. He needed to wipe it off before it stained the lace.

“Ugh, now I’ve done it... do you think it’ll stain?”

“No, we got it just in time. If we go home and deal with it right, it’ll probably be fine.”

He wet the tissue lightly in a cup of water and nervously gave the dress light pats while Taiga let loose pitiful whines. After all, the dress was easily at least twenty times the price of any outfit Ryuuji wore...and even if it wasn’t Ryuuji’s, he had to take care of it, or he would be blaspheming the money gods. Even if

the two of them had been bickering a minute ago, that was irrelevant, now. Before he knew it, Ryuuji had lapsed back into their normal tempo—and that was all right. In the end, this was how it worked.

He and Taiga were always like this. While Ryuuji absentmindedly deployed his emergency stain removal techniques, his eyes grew distant.

Come to think of it, their common ground had originally been that they had crushes on each other's best friends. When that came to light through chance and circumstance, they eventually formed a strange, united front...which pretty much mostly favored Taiga, but anyway, the point was that they'd formed a relationship because they were both at the end of their ropes.

Since Taiga lived by herself, she came to depend on Ryuuji's natural love of chores and cleanliness and all things housekeeping-related. Ryuuji, instead of refusing that request, deftly synched their complex household environments, yielding the current arrangement.

Taiga, you klutz.

Ryuuji had found out about the other surprising side of the feared Palmtop Tiger—the part of her that was unfortunately vulnerable, the part that only Ryuuji knew about in the whole world. Because of that, Ryuuji couldn't let Taiga out of his sight. She was the kind of person who would trip over herself three times in a day if she were left alone. When she was behind him, he couldn't help but look over his shoulder and, when she used fire, he couldn't help but want to intervene. If he didn't prepare her meals for her, she had nothing to eat, and then she would crash. He felt like he had to chaperone her on a daily basis just in case she did anything reckless.

But, on top of that—he had accidentally witnessed the scene where her sensitive, once-in-a-lifetime confession of love had been exchanged. And unexpectedly, he'd also discovered that she was a crybaby.

Things had escalated until Ryuuji and Taiga reached a miraculous equilibrium. They settled into a strange relationship where they were having meals together, going to school together, and even shopping together, but weren't dating. Such was the nature of their strange relationship.

At any rate, if Ryuuji had to admit it, there was another reason he stuck by

her. Ryuuji was a *Ryu*—a dragon—and Taiga was a tiger, and a tiger and a dragon always came as a set.

“Ah!”

The second blueberry-colored droplet broke Ryuuji’s thoughts.

“...That was close. Out of all places, why would you spill it where I’m already wiping up? It fell on my finger though, so it’s fine.”

“Quit yapping. It wasn’t on purpose, and it’s not like I even asked you to wipe it up, anyway.”

“That’s some gratitude! Well in that case, do *you* know how to remove the stain? I think I know the answer! I’ll have you know I’m not doing this for you; I’m doing it for this dress.”

“Ohhhh, is that so? If you like it so much, then it’s all yours! Why don’t you try it on?”

Well...now the fight was getting worse, escalating.

But he couldn’t let expensive clothes get stained right before his eyes, not without doing something. Ryuuji’s gaze hardened into the stare of a criminal who’d done ten years’ hard time on three convictions (he might have been a little peeved). Heedless of other people’s stares, he once again became absorbed in dabbing at the dress. Then...

“Oh!”

At that involuntary noise from Taiga, Ryuuji raised his face reflexively. “What did you do this time?!”

“Nothing. ...This is cute, I’m buying it. I’m definitely buying it.” Mumbling to herself, Taiga folded down the corner of one of the magazine’s pages.

“What are you going to waste money on now? How many times do you need to buy the same dress before you’re satisfied? They’re all the same frilly and fluffy style, too. So hit me—which one is it? How much does it cost?”

“Jeez, you’re so obnoxious! Do you think you’re my mom or something?!”

“You’re going to make me put it away anyway, so I’ve got the right to check it

first.”

Ryuuji got up and promptly sat down next to the clamoring Taiga, so close that he was practically rubbing elbows with her. He glanced at the page she was looking at. The memory of furiously organizing the vast array of expensive outfits that had overflowed from Taiga’s closet was still vivid in his mind. He had a right to stop her from squandering money on frivolous shopping, once and for all.

But then he saw something.

“...Th-this one? I...wonder about that...”

He unconsciously cocked his head to the side. *I’m definitely buying it*, Taiga had muttered at the model on the page, who was beautifully posed in slimming jeans that showed off her long legs. It wasn’t frilly or fluffy, but...

“This isn’t *Chushingura*, you know. You can’t go around letting your hakama drag on the ground in the Shogun’s castle halls.”

Taiga was barely one hundred and forty centimeters tall, after all. The length of her legs was easy to guess, but Taiga cut right into his thoughts.

“...What I want is this. This *bag*.”

With her nail, Taiga gouged at the small purse the model was holding.

“O-oh...that’s what you meant.”

“Sorry for having short legs.” Her monotone voice was strangely calm, yet rang with terrible, ominous tones. Ryuuji was taken aback and instinctively prepared to escape. Taiga’s savage eyes narrowed, and the corners of her mouth turned up in a silent laugh.

“Wait, see, calm down...this is where Kushieda works...and it’s the palace, my liege.”

“What was that?! Are you messing with me?! I can’t *stand* that kind of attitude! If you know you’ve put your foot in your mouth, then why don’t you start by apologizing?!”

Fierce wrinkles appeared on Taiga’s nose—his rookie attempt at humor was a swing and a miss. *This is bad, I really made her mad*. He certainly *wanted* to

hurry up and get that apology over with, but...

“Guhhh...!”

“Anyway, yes, I have short legs! But that hasn’t ever caused anyone else trouble even once!”

Taiga had grabbed Ryuuji by the nape of the neck and was furiously shaking him back and forth. It wasn’t really so much that he couldn’t apologize as much as that he couldn’t *breathe*. He hit the table with his hand pitifully as he struggled. What he was trying so desperately to say was: “Tap out, tap out!”

Then Taiga’s hand unexpectedly slackened. Released, Ryuuji collapsed into the sofa, coughing.

“Y-you know...someday you’re gonna accidentally kill me! Like for real!”

“Wh-wh-wha...?” Taiga’s mouth popped half open as she blinked in childlike surprise.

Thinking she’d finally understood just how violent she’d been, Ryuuji gave a sage nod. “Right, it’s a shock, yeah? Now that you’ve learned your lesson, don’t pretend to strangle anyone ever again.”

“What?! What are you going on about? That’s not it at all. Here! Look at this!” Taiga glared at Ryuuji in irritation, pointing to the magazine page she’d just been examining. “Look, look!”

“...You already said you wanted the bag.”

“Nooo, not the *bag*! This! This *person*!”

Above her cherry-blossom-pink fingernail lay the beauty with the long, smoothly crossed legs—or more specifically, the beauty’s smiling face. Complementing the cool black background, she wore a camisole that cost several tens of thousands of yen along with an even more expensive pair of jeans. Her loosely curled hair trailed in the wind. Of course, she was a very pretty model, but then she *was* a model, so of course she would be pretty. It all looked pretty typical to him.

The moment he tried to ask *what about it*, she grasped his head —“Owowowow!”—and twisted it nearly one hundred and eighty degrees in the

opposite direction.

“...Oh!”

Without thinking, he made a sound of wonder nearly identical to Taiga’s own.

A few seats away from where Ryuuji and Taiga were sitting, a waitress led in a new customer.

Taiga and Ryuuji weren’t the only ones looking at her. The customers inside the busy restaurant turned around and whispered to each other. Pretty much all of them had turned their gazes to the newcomer.

The first thing that drew their eyes was her slim body, reminiscent of a slender fawn. She didn’t look that tall, but that was because her dainty head possessed the golden proportions of the perfect woman. Her hair was lustrous and silky, beautifully maintained all the way to the ends. But instead of falling straight, it had a wild feel to it, softly arrayed about her shoulders.

On her childlike, elfin face, she wore the huge sunglasses of a Hollywood celebrity, and she walked with the utmost poise. Thin-heeled sandals encircled her ankles, as well turned as any sculptor might have chiseled out of stone.

Even though she paired her slimming jeans with an incredibly plain knit top, the outfit made her exceptionally long limbs—unheard of for someone Japanese—shine brighter than any dress would have. The brand-name bag on her shoulder and her polished ivory skin spoke of a woman who was no amateur.

Long story short, she was stunning. No one could keep from turning to look at her—the woman was the center of their gravity.

When she casually pulled off her sunglasses, the entire restaurant was wrapped in strange excitement.

Ryuuji was no exception. “Whooooaaa,” he exclaimed, unintentionally concentrating his sharp, manic eyes on her.

Her own dewy eyes were subtly childlike. The features of her face seemed to radiate a light all their own.

Like a miracle, two giant eyes were set in her petite face. Her smooth cheeks

were flushed a bewitching, cherry blossom pink. Her soft, relaxed face was elegant, delicate, and sweet; her refined figure was eye-catching on a whole other level.

Everything about her was charming and pure. She was kind and gentle and graceful. Undoubtedly, she was like an angel. She was an angel who had descended upon a restaurant like this and deigned to generously shine her resplendent aura down on the mere mortals who happened to dwell within. He felt he could almost see a ring of light above her head.

And those good looks...

“...It’s her...”

“...Yeah...”

It was undoubtedly the beauty Taiga had picked out on the page.

“It’s the model...”

Seeing a model for the first time in his life, Ryuuji sighed deeply. When he saw her in the magazine, her looks didn’t seem anything so special, so how could the real thing be this dazzling? Could someone so exquisitely refined as this actually exist?

“Her name’s ‘Kawashima Ami.’ She was on the cover a month before last, too.” Taiga, cheeks unusually flushed, spoke with slight elation.

“I see... wow. I just might be her newest fan... Kawashima Ami-san, huh...? What’s she doing in a boring suburb like this...?”

“Her mom’s the actress Kawashima Anna. I saw it in another magazine a while back.”

“Wow... I just saw her on TV last night.” Ryuuji launched into a TV announcer impression. “Somewhere on the charming Izu Peninsula! A murder case—a copybara onsen temptation—the debutante coroner, Yuudzuku Reiko! Don’t miss season four!” He stopped to think over it. “...So she’s Yuudzuku Rieko’s daughter... now that you mention it, I can see the resemblance. Only one thing to do—take a cellphone picture.”

“Hey, knock it off. You’ll make her mad.”

“R-right, maybe so. ...Yeah, I’ll chill out. I got a little too excited.”

“You peasant.”

“Oh, come on. Like you weren’t excited, too?”

Close together on the same sofa seat, they both took several deep breaths.

“Not *that* excited, but...we did get to see something really great.”

“It’s our one and only memorable thing from over break.”

He nodded in agreement, and they both grabbed their cups at the same time. Then it happened—at the very moment they both took a sip. Ryuuji with his coffee, and Taiga with her mineral tea.

“Yuuusakuuu! Auntie, uncle, our seats are over here~!”

“Right!”

“Ptooie!”

“Ptooie!”

It was a furious, simultaneous spit take.

The two of them suffered terribly as they coughed in unison. And it was only natural. The beautiful model who had appeared before their eyes was affectionately calling over a familiar jerk.

“Wh-wh-wh...why?”

“K-K-Kita—Kitamura-kun?! No, *no*, why?! How is this happening?!”

Completely shaken, Ryuuji began furiously wiping the table with a napkin. Taiga was busy flailing around like a beached octopus and got her arm tangled with Ryuuji’s. Of course it would be *then* that they were noticed.

“Huh? If it isn’t Takasu and Aisaka. What a coincidence! What are you doing all tangled up? You two are as close as always!”

Kitamura Yuusaku had sauntered into the restaurant as if everything were totally normal. He waved his hand as he walked over. Such was Ryuuji’s turmoil that his knife-like eyes honed themselves to sharper and sharper points. Taiga was being washed away by a full-on wave of emotion, so intense that she

couldn't even speak. But Kitamura didn't mind.

"Apparently Kushieda works here part-time, too. Did you see her?"

Relentlessly cheerful, he continued to walk towards them.

"No, we saw Kushieda, but—never mind that!" With an expression grim enough to rival the monks of Mount Hiei, Ryuuji intensely pressed his carefree friend. "You—that—just what's going on here?! Why is—"

"Huh? Oh, right. This is good timing, I'll introduce you. These are my parents. Ryuuji, you met my mom at our parent-teacher conferences, right?"

"How are you, Takasu-kun, is your mom doing well?" Kitamura's parents bowed their heads, but he had to excuse himself.

"No, not *them*! That's not it at all!" He couldn't stop shaking his head. "The other thing. That... that... over there! *That*!"

Ryuuji's emotional lexicon was kind of on the small side. He was left twisting to the left and right, literally flailing for a way to convey his distress to his best friend.

"What's wrong, Yuusaku?"

"Right, I was just about to introduce you."

It was a catastrophe.

The source of the disturbance was approaching Ryuuji and Taiga on her own two feet, right before their eyes. Glittering particles of light seemed to surround her body as her sweet fragrance softly drifted towards them.

"This is Kawashima Ami. It may not seem like it, but we're the same age, and she used to live around here. In fact, she used to be my neighbor before she moved. I guess you could call her a childhood friend."



“What do you mean, ‘it may not seem like it?’” Even when smiling, she puffed up her cheeks as though she were pouting. Like she was just a regular girl, making fun of Kitamura with a glare.

There she was, in front of Ryuuji’s eyes. She was real. In the flesh. In all three dimensions.

Just what kind of miracle was this...?

But Kitamura wore a completely indifferent expression. “It’s just a figure of speech. Anyway, this is my good buddy Takasu Ryuuji, and this is Aisaka Taiga.”

He’d introduced the oddball boy-girl duo sitting side by side on the sofa to the angel.

The angel, Kawashima Ami, smiled cutely. “Nice to meet you! I’m Ami!”

She suddenly extended both her defenseless hands.

Ryuuji stared at those two beautiful hands... or rather, he was paralyzed by fascination, like a robot that couldn’t even comprehend the gesture.

“C’mon, let’s shake hands. If you’re a friend of Yuusaku’s, you’re a friend of mine.”

His hands just might melt, first. Syrupy sweat beaded on either palm.

“...Uh, uh, uhhh...”

Kawashima Ami gently scooped Ryuuji’s hand up from where it was resting on the table and wrapped it in both her own. They were cool and cold, and the touch of her rings to his skin was even colder.

“Oh, is that—it couldn’t be.”

Ryuuji was spaced out when Ami dropped his hand. Instead, she pointed her pretty finger at Taiga’s magazine, which was still spread out on the table.

“Kyaaaaa!”

What a lovely screech.

Ami grabbed the magazine, flustered. She pulled her shoulders in, holding the magazine tightly to her chest. She seemed...embarrassed? She lowered her elfin

face, still clutching the magazine to cover it. She looked up with just her eyes, batting her lashes such that her pupils glittered. “No way...! What a coincidence...! What are the odds of that? Maybe... oh no, you *definitely* know, don’t you? That I... if you saw me in here, then, that is to say...you know...that I’m doing this kind of work...!”

It seemed that there was real embarrassment wavering in that sparkle—it pierced through for several seconds. *What are you saying?* Ryuuji thought, half-stunned.

With those looks, no one needed to see a magazine to think Ami was a model or a star, anyway. It only took a glance. But what he couldn’t understand was how Ami thought she wouldn’t be found out. Maybe Ami didn’t realize just how extraordinary she looked?

He condensed those thoughts and somehow squeezed out a reply. “No... just looking at you, you look like...a model...”

They were incredibly blunt words, for Ryuuji. That was his limit. But...

“Huuuh? That’s not truuue!” Ami’s voice rose high, her eyes open wide. She tilted her head in doubt, her skepticism undoubtedly springing from the bottom of her heart. “That’s not true at all! I don’t even have makeup on, and this outfit’s just a bunch of stuff I randomly threw together. What on Earth about my look says ‘model’?”

Which meant she really had no idea—this angel. Maybe this was innocence, or purity.

“See, my hair’s all messed up, and I haven’t done anything to it since I woke up and like, really, I didn’t even comb it! I was like, *this is fiiine*, and then I went out, right? I wonder why you... it’s so weird... I don’t understand...”

As he watched the worry on her face, Ryuuji somehow understood. *People who are born naturally beautiful are oblivious to how rare their beauty is. That’s definitely what’s going on here. But because of that, they might be able to stay pure. And then that purity makes her even more beautiful.* Then, while he was absentmindedly thinking all that...

“Ah!”

Ami's fingertip suddenly thrust at the tip of Ryuuji's nose.

"You just thought I was 'oblivious,' right?"

"Huh?"

Shaken up, Ryuuji froze. Right in front of him, Ami puffed up one cheek and glared at him with mischief in her eyes. He really *had* thought she was oblivious, but the connotation was a little different... or no, maybe it was right—at least, in this case.

"Well, I know, okay? You *did* think that, right?"

Somewhere in the depths of Ami's eyes he could feel the presence of a hidden smile, and he automatically gave in to her by nodding.

"I knew it!"

Aaaahh. Ami sighed sweetly in lamentation, and peevishly pouted her lips. "Well, people always say that to me. Ami is reeeaaally oblivious, they say. I wonder why? I'm not oblivious at all, but everyone says I am. ...Yuusaku probably thinks so, too. Because he looks really bored."

"That's not true." Kitamura waved away the subject before giving a faintly bitter smile, and shrugged. Then, as though he had been waiting for an opportune moment, he started lightly pressing on Ami's back. "Come on. Let's head back to our seats. Our parents can't order without us."

"Oh, right! Oops, we made them all wait, didn't we?"

Sorry! They raised their hands to Ryuuji and Taiga.

"You'll be here a while, right? Our parents said they'd go home right after eating, so we'll come talk to you once dinner's over."

"Oh, sure."

"See you later!"

Waving her hand and turning on her heel, Ami carried herself so beautifully—what a turbulent affair. And it seemed the turbulence was far from over.

While watching Ami and his close friend depart, Ryuuji slunk back into the sofa chair, as though exhausted. He carefully watched the two until they

reached their seats.

“Ahhh...”

Enraptured, he sighed. Several times.

She was that beautiful. And not only that, her mom was a famous actress. But even then, she wasn't arrogant at all. She was eternally pure. It didn't even cross her mind that she was beautiful. She was a little bit of an airhead, but wasn't that part of her charm? To think there was a girl like that in this world... she was like some kind of superhero, the perfect woman.

She was completely different from a certain similarly beautiful, but strangely quarrelsome and woefully twisted Palmtop Tiger. Even trying to compare them was a fool's endeavor.

“...Hey, even though Kawashima Ami's famous, she seems really sweet. She's pretty, but she's got a nice personality, too. Maybe you could learn a thing or two. To think Kitamura would have a childhood friend like that... Right, Tai...”

“...”

“Tai...ga...?”

He gulped audibly, fidgeting in his seat. Casually, oh so casually, he tried to move back to the opposite side of the table.

He'd been careless. He hadn't noticed the soundlessly grumbling tiger beside him. Now that he thought about it, her whole presence had been strangely muted—but in actuality, the ornery predator had merely concealed herself in the brush, the better to stalk her prey.

Like a beast with one paw out of the thicket, Taiga's body seemed to emanate an aura of turbulent bloodlust. Her small, beautiful features had become an eerie Noh theater mask. It seemed even now that her contorted lips might part, revealing the fangs of a beast ready to rend flesh from bone. The piercing, ferocious light in her large eyes was half-hidden by thin eyelids as she watched Ami's departing back. She settled her small frame back against the cushions but arrogantly jutted out her chin.

Taiga was in a terrible mood.

Even if he ignored the more obvious differences between her and the passing angel, Ryuuji couldn't resist making a comment. "You... how do I say this... are you sure the attitude's a good idea? You don't need to look so ticked off just because Kitamura's got a beautiful childhood friend. Weren't you just all charged up and happy a moment ago?"

"You've got the wrong idea." Her voice rang ominously, low and quiet, like the rumble of a tiger licking her chops. "It's not something as stupid as that. It's not..."

But Taiga paused, and pushed her hair up. She snorted, and the tension in the tiger seemed to loosen.

"...Whatever. It's fine." Her bright, sharp eyes seemed to melt into a cruel smile as she turned them on Ryuuji. "Isn't it stupid to humor her? Did you see it, just now? Even you should have been able to notice, and you're dumber than a box of rocks."

"...Did I notice what, now?"

"I'm good at sniffing these things out. I guess I can at least give you a hint—how many people have you met before who could honestly say that everyone calls them oblivious?"

"...Did she say something like that?"

"It doesn't matter anymore." Taiga huffed, spitefully twisting her rosebud lips as she looked away from Ami.

She's in a bad mood, but chances are good that she won't ask to go home if there's any opportunity she could talk to Kitamura, Ryuuji thought.

Taiga continued to read the magazine with an unreadable, stone-faced expression. Ryuuji flipped through pages of the bento recipe book that came bundled with it, unable to put himself at ease. Half an hour must have passed.

"Yo. Our parents went home." Dressed in his regrettably shabby Uniqlo outfit, Kitamura accompanied the beautiful model to their seat. She seemed to radiate inner light. When Ami crossed the restaurant, her charm drew all the customers' gazes without exception.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting!” One step behind Kitamura, Ami wore a beatific smile as she waved at Ryuuji. Without realizing it, he was lured into waving back.

“Aren’t you cheerful... like a *dog* wagging its tail...”

At Taiga’s cold words, he felt a strange embarrassment, and lowered his hand.

As expected, he couldn’t get out the words to say, “Kawashima-san should sit by me. Kitamura should sit by Taiga.” So it was only natural that the boys sat on one side and the girls on the other.

Settled in next to Ryuuji, Kitamura opened the menu and questioned the girl across from him. “Ami, you’re still okay on time, right? Do you want to order something?”

“No, thanks. We just ate! I’m stuffed. ...What about you two?”

At the sudden change of topic, Ryuuji’s shoulders jumped with a start. Taiga, unable even to look at Kitamura in his everyday clothes, was looking down at her own knees, frozen.

“Uhhhh, what... wh-what should we do? Taiga?”

Taiga swung her head side to side, still looking down.

End of conversation. Well, what should we do next? What should we talk about next?

With eyes full of hope, Ryuuji waited for Kitamura, the one person he knew best out of all of them, to continue to speak. *This is probably the last opportunity in my life to share a table with a model. Please push the conversation somewhere fun—make this a moment to remember*, he prayed.

But then...

“Ahhh, I’m pretty tired after so much time with relatives. Excuse me, I’m going to take a quick bathroom break.” Kitamura was, as usual, the only relaxed one among them. He stood from his seat, oblivious of the atmosphere he would leave behind.

“Uh, wai...”

Flustered, Ryuuji stretched his arm after Kitamura, but he couldn't just say it. *You're not actually going, are you?*

He looked at Taiga. She had turned to stone, still looking down.

He looked at Ami. She smiled happily, a question mark practically visible in the air above her. She tilted her head in puzzlement at Ryuuji—who was, after all, acting pretty suspicious.

It was impossible. No matter how hard he tried, he just wasn't capable of keeping things together. Ryuuji pretended to casually scratch his head. "Oh, I kind of think I have to go, too. Uh, where was the restroom again...?"

Though he was late, he followed after Kitamura, accompanying him in formation. Onward to urination!

Of course, he did wonder. Was it really okay leaving Taiga with that girl when she was in so bad a mood...? Shamefully, his nerves won out. He was bad at talking to begin with, and Ami was a *girl*, and a mega-gorgeous model, at that. In times like these, he couldn't depend on Taiga. Ryuuji didn't have a shred of confidence that he could rally things without Kitamura.

Ryuuji couldn't even look back at his abandoned seat. He followed after Kitamura, who was heading towards the men's room in an awful hurry. This was about as pitiful as it got, but he couldn't help it. He'd take the opportunity to pee to his heart's content.

But Kitamura took him by surprise by turning around just before they reached the restroom door.

"Good. You came."

"Wait, what?"

"Just as planned. I was sure if I got out of my seat, you'd follow along in short order," he murmured, pushing up his silver-rimmed glasses.

Ryuuji, his sharp eyes glinting, wondered just what was going on. Kitamura beckoned him over to hide in the shadow of the cigarette vending machine. "There's something I want to ask you. I want you to answer honestly." His apricot-shaped eyes bored straight into Ryuuji. Then, unblinking, he came

straight out with it. “Takasu, what did you think of Ami?”

Then he waited.

“...So you don’t have to pee?”

“Nope.”

He looked dead serious. It seemed Kitamura really *had* come here just to talk to Ryuuji. Even though he didn’t understand the reason for the question, it seemed like he had to answer. It wasn’t like he had any good reason not to.

“...I didn’t think anything in particular...and you shouldn’t just suddenly bring over a cute girl like her without giving me any warning! I got so nervous I didn’t know what to do.”

“Well, she is cute. I’ll admit that.”

“No, she’s not just cute, though. She’s a really good girl. How do I put this... she’s, like, pure... like so pure she needs someone to protect her...”

“...Yaaaah.” In a moment of uncharacteristic behavior, Kitamura scowled, pushed his glasses up to his forehead, and rubbed his eyes, as though dreadfully tired. Abruptly, he pushed against Ryuuji’s back.

“Whoa, wait a second. Wait a—where are we going? What about the restroom? Aren’t you going back to your seat?”

“Well... for now, crouch down.”

The safety of the bathrooms got further and further away. They headed back towards the seating area. Then, stooping and hiding behind decorative plants, they concealed themselves behind the barrier that divided the smoking and non-smoking sections. Though he still had no clue *why* they were doing this, Ryuuji couldn’t do anything but hide. They had gone the long way around so that they were right behind the seats where they left Taiga and Ami. They could see the two perfectly clearly, but from where the girls sat, this was a blind spot.

“...This kinda feels like stalking. What are we doing?”

“Trust me. Pipe down and watch.”

Over where Kitamura pointed, Ami was slowly crossing her legs. She threw an arm across the back of the booth.

“Gahh, it’s so *hot* in here. Hey, hey, I’m thirsty, you wanna run along and get Ami-chan an iced tea?”

Brushing her fine hair, plainly irritated even at a glance, Ami kept her chin propped on her hand—and brazenly shoved her glass over toward Taiga.

“...”

Taiga took a quick glance at it, then without changing her expression, returned her eyes to her knees. The one who lightly clicked her tongue wasn’t Taiga, but Ami.

“Are you for real? You’re useless. Or maybe just sad... Don’t you think it’s bad manners, ignoring me like that? Not that it matters. I’ll have Yuusaku get it for me when he comes back, anyway. Or maybe I’ll ask that weird guy with the creepo eyes pretty please. I bet he’s up to doing just about anything, if it’s Ami-chan who asks him.” She spoke in a sickly-sweet voice, strawberry-colored lips slightly contorted. But her veneer of pure beauty didn’t so much as crack. And then, recklessly, not even bothering to glance at Taiga, Ami asked, “Hey, hey. Is he, like, your boyfriend?”

“...”

Taiga remained silent as a doll.

“Mind if I steal him from you? Not that I actually want to keep him or anything.”

“...”

“And what’s up with those *eyes*? Is he like a delinquent or something? How’d you end up hanging out with a loser like that? Y’know, I kind of respect your total lack of shame.”

“...”

With her mouth still closed, Taiga turned her clear eyes on Ami.

“Well, y’knooow. In a place like this, with nothing to do, I guess beggars can’t be choosers. Ah, this town. It’s. The. Worst.”

After letting out that little singsong conclusion, Ami didn't even seem to be waiting for Taiga's reply. She brusquely pulled her brand-name bag towards herself, took out a huge hand mirror, and started gazing upon her own beauty. Then she combed her fingers through her hair several times, rearranging it, before carefully applying a transparent gloss. She posed to the front. She posed to the side. She faced the mirror again. "I'm so cute," she muttered happily, suddenly grinning in satisfaction. "Ahhh, I feel like doing something fun all of a sudden... what do you usually do with that guy? Go out joyriding?"

"...He's not my boyfriend." Anyone who knew Taiga would be shaking at the sound of her flat, emotionless murmur.

"Ohhh? Is that sooo? Not like I care, but...I guess that these days, even delinquents have standards. Kind of hard to believe, but if you're asking me? Dating somebody so different, so *below* me, just wouldn't work out."

Still looking into the mirror, Ami snorted in apparent scorn. Then, suddenly, she took her eyes off the mirror and turned a condescending eye on Taiga.

"Hey, how tall are you, anyway? I just noticed, but you're kinda freakishly small."

"..."

She leered at Taiga, slowly peering from head to toe—and then, as though astonished, raised her eyebrows. "Honestly, I'm amazed you can find a store that sells anything your size. But, like, really—when you buy jeans, how far up do you have to hem them? Must be a pain. I've *never* had to do mine."

"...And that is her true nature."

"That girl is *evil*!"

"You said it. That's Ami's *real* personality. She's been like that since before she started kindergarten. She's spoiled. Stubborn. Tyrannical. The quintessential example of a spoiled princess."

Ryuuji trembled as he looked at his friend's face. He was on the verge of crushing the leaf of the decorative plant he was holding. "Wh-what kind of

terrible personality is that...? Where does she get off calling herself 'Ami-chan?!' God, she scares me! Was she possessed by the devil? Because that's the only explanation I can think of!"

"...You said it."

Up until now, he hadn't *ever* seen a girl talk like that in his life. ...Well, someone in his class might have, but Ryuuji barely approached girls as a rule, so he probably never noticed. The one and only girl Ryuuji spent his days with was Taiga (who of course was her own flavor of terrible), but he had a feeling Taiga's personality and Ami's charted widely different trajectories. It might've had something to do with the accidental way he found out about how brave Taiga really was, or how she was pretty much an underdog, but he felt like he'd pick Taiga's personality over Ami's every time.

"It'd be great if Ami's outer persona were the real thing, but for some reason or another... there are underlying problems with her personality. When she doesn't care about the person she's with, her real self comes out. And the people she doesn't care about are usually girls."

"...D-does that mean that models really *do* need to be that nasty to make it professionally...?"

"I don't think it was quite like that. It's more like she created a mask when she *started* modeling. Personally, I'd rather she just dropped the facade and acted like her real self all the time."

"Well, her real self being what it is... I have to wonder if that's a good idea."

Kitamura slowly, slowly tilted his head at his friend's words, but Ryuuji suddenly leaned forward. *What's wrong, Palmtop Tiger?* "Is Taiga really okay letting her walk all over her like that?" *At least hurry up and tell her I'm not some delinquent thug...* He bit his lip, both his eyes glinting brutally. Ryuuji stared at the two beautiful girls.

Taiga, still silent, wore a calm expression.

"Don't tell me she's holding back because she's your childhood friend!"

"Holding back" were words that normally wouldn't have a place in Aisaka Taiga's vocabulary, but she had a definite weakness for Kitamura. That must be

it. He couldn't think of another reason for Taiga's silence.

And that was the moment when it happened.

How did it come to this?

A scene exploded into Ryuuji's vision. There was only one word for it.

SLAP!

"...Wha?!"

Ami clutched her cheek, eyes open wide. She couldn't get out a word.

"A mosquito. There was a mosquito on your cheek."

Beside Ami prowled the tiger, fangs momentarily bared in a thin smile. For just a moment, her red tongue flashed across her lips.

"You're lucky, really. Imagine trying to sell that precious face of yours after it got devoured by mosquitos." Taiga paused. "Oh. My bad. It was just a fly."

"Erk...!"

She opened one wee hand to display the corpse of the fruit fly she'd just ruthlessly executed.

When she saw it, Ami's face turned scarlet before their eyes. "Wh-wh-what have you done?!"

Naturally, she was in a rage. But then Taiga scoffed at Ami with a snort of her nose. "Hey, I did it out of the goodness of my heart. You ought to have a better sense of gratitude."

"Gratitude?!"

Ami's screech approached the ultrasonic. The surrounding customers began to notice the commotion.

"GRATITUDE, MY ASS! What's *wrong* with you?! I can't believe this! Where do you get the nerve?! This is the worst—the worst! The! Absolute! Worst! This is why I didn't want to slum it in a joint like this!"

"...You sure are loud."

A single wrinkle carved a line across Taiga's forehead. Her glittering eyes

narrowed eerily. Her blood-tinged aura grew. *Tsk*. Even the click of her tongue was a bullet loaded with malice. And then— “Shut up, you spoiled brat.” Taiga threw out her words with sharp, high-handed contempt.

Ami’s voice finally petered out. She’d met her match.

“...Awha...uhh...uh...wha?”

Ami’s thin shoulders started shuddering. Her breathing grew ragged. Her cute face suddenly contorted.

“Ah, this isn’t good,” Kitamura muttered, already on his feet. Ryuuji dashed along with him, back towards a very awkward table.

It got worse when they arrived.

“Yu...”

It was like a shoujo manga. Flowers in full bloom blossomed behind Ami as she turned around—or that’s what it seemed like. And Ami carried herself to match. So pretty, so dramatic...

“Yuusakuuuuuuu! Waaahhh!”

She jumped straight at Kitamura’s chest, tears in freefall.

Her delicate shoulders shuddered as she sobbed, the sound of her voice never quite forming words, until finally she whispered... “I wanna go home now.” She lisped out her complaint like a child. She looked up at Kitamura from up close, eyes wet with huge teardrops.

“Siiiigh... Why can’t you just get along? Really...sorry that she’s making such a commotion, Aisaka. Takasu, you too. I’m going to take her home.”

Kitamura lowered his head and his eyebrows alike. Every inch of his body expressed profound apology. Then, still holding onto Ami, he skillfully retrieved her bag from the seat, turned towards the gawking restaurant crowd, and pulled Ami along to the exit.

The one who was left behind was...

“Ta...Taiga...?”

“ ... ”

“...Hey, keep it together!”

The phrase *won the battle but lost the war* was written all over Taiga’s face.

Taiga pouted faintly, but her eyes slowly grew calm. She looked like a statue of the Buddha. Empty... silent. This development called for consolation, but Ryuuji illustrated another classic phrase—*at a loss for words*.

“Well, um...right. Yup. Uh. Cheer up.”

“...”

“Let me put it simply. Kitamura and I saw everything. Kitamura doesn’t think one bit that you teased Kawashima Ami at all.”

“...So what you’re really telling me is—after seeing everything, Kitamura chose to protect that girl and agreed to take her back home.”

“...He didn’t protect her.”

“...He gently held her, softly consoled her...”

“...I don’t think he was holding her, but...whoa!”

The waitress shrieked at the same time they heard the sound of breaking glass. The plate she was clearing had shattered to pieces on the floor. And that wasn’t the end of it. Probably feeling that something was off, a kid who’d been puttering around nearby suddenly burst out crying. *Waaaahhh!*

Ker-splash! The milk steamer at the drink bar suddenly broke and belched out smoke.

“Kyaa!” “Eyaagh!” The customers standing in line scattered away from the roiling milk steam.

“Manager! The toilet is clogged...gahhh!” The sound of an employee who didn’t want to know what had happened rung out and immediately trailed off.

“...I HATE that girl!” Murderous anger exuded from Taiga’s whole body, spewing thundering blue sparks. And she went right on emitting them, the force terrible to behold.

It was all out of Ryuuji’s control now.

Taiga’s lips were pressed tight together, mostly devoid of color; her clenched

fists were shaking, and then...

“Hey! Don’t cry!”

“...Tsk.”

If Kitamura had been there, it would have been a totally different story. But now, transparent tears had begun to well up in Taiga’s eyes.

“People are looking. Pull yourself together!”

“Uhhhnnggh...” Groaning in frustration, Taiga rubbed her eyes with the sleeve of her clothes. It was a disaster.

Right when Ryuuji felt like holding his head in his hands, a piece of good news came to his ears.

“Huh? What happened?”

“Minorin...!”

Back from wherever she’d been before, the waitress Minorin was on the scene. Her eyes went wide as saucers. “Taiga, you’re looking pretty unhappy. Did something happen?”

“...No, nothing... I’m going to wash my hands. Because I touched something dirty.”

“Woow, you smooshed a fly.”

Taiga showed the palm of her hand as she stood up, and Minori gave way to Taiga’s path. After that, Minori watched Taiga’s back for a while, then slowly turned back to face Ryuuji.

“That other girl, what happened to her? Did something happen while I was on break?”

“...No...or, well, actually, there was some trouble.”

It wasn’t just because of his nervousness that he hesitated. He simply didn’t know how to explain what had happened. But why, out of all the times this could have happened, did it happen when Minori went on break?

Minori, whose easygoing nature approached the divine, hummed in consideration. “I don’t know what happened, but she’s pretty mad. ...It’s rare

for Taiga to be so docile.”

“You call that *docile*?!”

Now why was it?

Why did Ryuuji feel more terror in that one moment than he had in the entire day combined?

All the same, they finished shopping and returned to the Takasu residence. By the time Ryuuji was starting to make the rice, Taiga’s good mood had returned.

“We probably won’t ever see each other again anyway. And it didn’t seem like Kitamura was dating her. More than anything else, I can’t stand humoring someone like that.”

“Two cups is good, right? Should I make two and a half cups of rice?”

“Two and a half’s fine.” Her face was still puffy, but as she fiddled with the jar of sugar in the corner of the kitchen, Taiga said, “I’m gonna be the adult here. I’ll hold back my hate.”

“Is that something the person who went and slapped her can say? ...Hey, I told you not to play with the sugar.”

“...”

“Don’t lick the spoon, either!”

Chapter 2

The next shock came to them one refreshing morning soon after the holidays ended.

The time was just past eight o'clock in the morning.

The place was their homeroom. Class had started early, since their teacher came in much earlier than usual.

“Whoa...”

The mouth of hell had broken open.

That was probably how you'd describe this situation. Ryuuji covered his mouth to keep from shouting. What his eyes were telling couldn't be real. He just couldn't believe it—no—he didn't *want* to believe it. But, somehow, this was no dream.

He turned around and quickly mouthed to Kitamura—*you didn't tell me*—but Kitamura's expression was laidback. He raised his hand and threw out a carefree “Yo.”

Anyway, it was a done deal. You couldn't put something like this back in the box.

Ryuuji felt halfway frozen. The deadly look in his eyes had gone into Trans-Am mode, tripling in intensity. All he could do was brace himself for whatever bubbled up from hell's wide-open maw.

Hell itself sauntered up to the teacher's podium on skinny legs, beautiful hair swaying.

The demon faced the front of the room, faintly embarrassed. Lit by gentle morning sun, her smile seemed to melt amid the beams of dazzling light. Finally, she slowly raised her eyes.

“I'm a new transfer student starting at this school today. My name is Kawashima Ami. Nice to meet you!”

Her face was clear, pure, and pleasant. A full-blown mask.

Impossible.

“...No way... how could it come to *this...?*”

No one noticed his groan. The classroom had left Ryuuji in the lurch. He turned ghost-white, ignored by everyone.

“W-wait, that girl—wasn’t she in a magazine?!”

“For real?! Which one was it?! Man, she’s so *cute!*”

No way. No way! It can’t be true, this is amazing, just amazing...! The ladies of the class were having a collective fangirl moment. The boys, on the other hand, were acting suspiciously timid. Strangely quiet. Enraptured, they looked up at the pure angel on the teacher’s podium with feverish eyes. Sitting diagonally ahead of Ryuuji was Noto Hisamitsu, who slowly turned his black-framed, bespectacled face towards him. In a happy, heartfelt whisper, he hissed out:

“Jackpot!”

Fist pump.

“...Uhhh...yeaaaah...” Ryuuji managed an uncertain nod, but instead of making a fist, he choked down a bitter swallow.

Ami was beautiful at the podium. Her eggshell skin was smoother still than the day before, her radiant aura all the brighter. Her gem-like eyes were large. Her lips bore an unceasing smile as she looked down on the class, head cocked to one side. She seemed so childish, surely because of her small chin, but her figure was of golden proportions. Ami was out of this world: a devastatingly beautiful girl.

Ryuuji’s headache was pretty devastating, too.

He gently turned to look at a seat nearly in the center of the classroom. Sitting there was the person who was perhaps most devastated of all. And her name was Taiga.

He saw her.

“...Whoa...!”

And then he immediately looked away. That was a face he never should have

seen.

Taiga's eyebrows were raised so high they'd practically gone vertical. Her eyes oozed a seething flow of molten lava. Her rose-colored lips trembled, contorting into a sinister curl. Taiga was a lit fuse, just this side of exploding with rage—she'd lost patience with reality itself. Her cheeks were swollen, her teeth grit; she looked like she was gnawing on a bomb. Just then, her mere gaze could probably have struck a weaker man dead.

That was when Ami, busy looking down on the class, became aware of Taiga's very real bloodlust. For a moment, her eyebrows raised slightly in surprise. But just as one might expect, she handled it like a pro.

"Everyone! Please call me Ami!"

Ami hid it perfectly. No one could have guessed she'd seen Taiga; she scrunched her eyes as she gave her cutest smile. But even that was enough to utterly terrify Ryuuji. *Are all girls like this?* A cold, heavy chill ran through his body. His hands automatically closed the buttons of his open jacket.

"Okay, everyone! Please get along with your new classmate! Now let's have a round of applause!"

The familiar, oddly cheerful shout of their unmarried homeroom teacher, Koigakubo Yuri—29 years old—rang out during the scattered clapping. She grasped Ami's shoulders, entirely too familiar. "They're all good kids. You'll fit right in!" She squeezed her shoulders again, then held up a clenched, encouraging fist.

...It seemed like something had totally altered her personality over the break. Before, she was always swathed head to toe in pretty, pink, popular fashion pieces, but now she wore a casual tracksuit and parka...

"Here's to a brand-new start for our second-years in class C!" She gave them all a big thumbs-up.

"...Tsk." Taiga clicked her tongue, exuding an oppressive and sullen aura as she glared up at her teacher.

Today, the spinster was undeterred. "Let's not click our tongues, now! Let's smile and enjoy our day to the fullest!"

“...Tsk.”

“After all, we’ve added a new person like Kawashima-san to our rolls, so today—”

“...Tsk.”

Nrrrnnggh!—it seemed that was the only sound the poor spinster could get out, suddenly clutching at the top of her head. Then she twirled on the spot, dejectedly flopped her arms onto her desk, and let her head conk against its surface.

“Y-Yuri-sensei...?”

“Uh, is she okay...?”

As expected, the classroom was enveloped in a hushed silence. Ami stood staring at the spinster’s side, stock-still.

Eventually, the bachelorette raised her face a good ten seconds later. While slightly trembling, still half looking down, she strangled out a regretful personal announcement.

“Y-your teacher, during this last break, had her last shot...or what seemed like her last shot, anyway...and *missed*...! So—so I have to do my best! I have to do my job as best I can, but, but...it’s fine. It’s fine if no one understands. B—because I think you will *all* understand in about ten years’ time...! Kitamura-kun, I’ll let you take it from here.”

“You got it.”

Immediately accepting the appointment, Kitamura stood straight up. He looked around the class as he spoke. “Okay everyone, please listen for a minute. You all might want to know that Ami is actually my childhood friend! I never imagined she would transfer into the same class as me, but, well—please try and get along with her. And that about covers it for morning homeroom! Stand! Bow!”

I’m so done with this. The unmarried woman’s groan of sorrow was absorbed by the cacophony that practically exploded through the classroom.

“K-Kawashima-san, would you like me to carry that for you?”

“No, I’ve got it!”

“Please let me help!”

“No, no, I’ll do it! I can’t just sit around and leave it to all of you!”

As Ami tried to carry desks and chairs into the classroom, a sudden crowd of boys surrounded her. The shy ones watched jealously from afar. It seemed everyone wanted to approach her, but being inside the crowd or outside of it was simply a difference in bravery.

“It’s okay, really! I’m fine! I can handle something like this no problem. I’m actually pretty strong!” Without relying on anyone else, Ami heaved the desk up with her thin arms to demonstrate.

“Ah, that’s dangerous!”

“Kawashima-san, let us take care of it!”

“It’s okay, I’m fine!” Unaided, she walked between the guys who wanted to lend her a hand. “...See! Right? This is super light!”

She put the desk and chair down at the indicated spot and cheerfully beamed her angel’s smile. Just like that, the boys lost their pretext to talk to her.

“If you ever need anything, you can count on us!” the boys said firmly before they reluctantly stepped away—only to be immediately replaced by a wave of girls.

“Wow, Kawashima-san, you moved that all by yourself? You should have asked the boys to help.”

“Yeah, that’s right, and they seem like they’re just *desperate* to talk to you, Kawashima-san. They definitely would have been happy just to have the chance.”

Ami deployed a smile even brighter than the one she’d given the boys, waving her hand in front of her face, as if the whole thing were just silly. “I’m okay, really! This thing’s light as can be. And to be honest... though this is just between us... I’m the type that gets pretty nervous talking to boys.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. More importantly, thanks for coming over to say hello! This is actually the first time any girl in my new class has come to talk to me—it makes me super happy! You can all call me by my first name. Ami!” After those candid words, she sat right down into her chair. But then...

“Yow!”

...She slammed her shin against the foot of the desk. Ami scrunched her face up in comically overwrought pain.

“Aww, jeez! This is so uncool! Here I was thinking that since I had a fresh start, I could pull off looking funny and clever.” Casually, she added, “I guess I only got the funny part down!”

The other girls burst out into boisterous laughter. “Kawashima-san...or wait, Ami-chan...are you pretty much, like, a klutz?”

“I guess you’re a little oblivious, Ami-chan! Aww, why are you messing up a face that cute with an expression that funny?”

“Heyyy, don’t say it’s funny! I was supposed to be *clever*, okay?”

Ahaha! Ahahaha! And on they laughed.

Ryuuji, off in his window seat, rested his chin in his hands. He watched in silence as the excited group surrounding Ami enjoyed themselves. It was a rare moment; his eyes were so empty that they lacked their trademark glint. *I guess she even puts on an act for this kind of thing. At this rate, it kinda feels like I might wind up distrusting girls in general.*

No sooner did he think that than he met Ami’s eyes. Ami’s mouth half-opened, and she blinked in surprise. It seemed she had finally realized that not just Taiga, but also Ryuuji was in her class. She pointed at Ryuuji with her thin finger.

“Whaaa, it can’t be! Takasu-kun, that’s you, right?”

“...”

It was automatic.

Automatically, he pretended not to hear, and averted his face. It was the kind of thing you'd do if you saw something unpleasant out on the street. Although he had done it on the spur of the moment, and it probably seemed extremely mean...he didn't have the courage to look back at Ami. Ryuuji just continued to seemingly ignore her on purpose. All he could do was endure the boisterous voices of the girls.

"Ami-chan, you know Takasu Ryuuji?! How?!"

"Uhh, yesterday, Yuusaku introduced me when we happened to run into him at a restaurant, but...it looks like he doesn't like me for some reason? It wasn't my imagination, was it? Just now, when he turned around..."

Although she seemed to be trying to keep it at a quiet whisper, Ami's voice was instead pitched perfectly to reach Ryuuji's ears. She very well might have intended for him to hear her. This was Ami, so she would probably do something like that... maybe.

"Aww! Takasu is kind of an antisocial guy. I don't think he hates you. He's probably just being shy!"

"That's right! Until we were in the same class as him, we all thought he had to be a terrible delinquent just because of his scary face. We wouldn't even go near him!"

...Sorry for being antisocial. Ryuuji stared motionlessly out the window, but his heart was secretly wounded.

"Isn't Takasu-kun a troublemaker, though?"

"It doesn't seem like it, even if the first-years and kids in the other classes are still scared of him. So, Ami-chan, you don't have to worry about him; you'll be fine!"

"That's right, that's right!"

"Oh...you think so, hmm...?"

Hmm... Then he felt a gaze on the back of his neck. It felt like it was somehow appraising him. He rubbed his neck, which was suddenly afflicted with an intolerable itch. For an instant, he couldn't even pretend to not be listening. He

twisted his ticklish back and, against his better judgement, turned to look at Ami.

And then...Ami showed him a very faint smile. Ryuuji felt so shaken that his eyes gleamed like the edge of a knife.

He was sure he only locked eyes with Ami for a moment, but her eyes seemed so teary they were about to overflow.

She immediately turned back to the ring of girls and gave them a smile...but what had been that gaze filled with unspeakable distress? It was practically burned into his retinas; he couldn't erase it from his memory. She looked at Ryuuji without anger or resentment, but instead an anxious expression that was so fleeting, it almost seemed translucent. Even within that cheerful ring of people, her eyes cast a quiet light, like a reflection off a tranquil body of water. It was almost as though they were wet with secret tears. Ryuuji felt as though her soundless voice were delivered directly to his ears, "I wonder why you're being so cold to me...?"

"...N-no, that wasn't what I meant...it wasn't!"

Ryuuji shook his head back and forth. He tried to erase that vivid image from his memory. *That wasn't it, that wasn't what it was—of course it wasn't.*

What was beautiful was terrifying. Even though he had seen her true nature right before his very eyes just the other day, he was *still* at risk of mistaking Ami for an innocent beauty.

Ryuuji came back to himself, stood up, and headed to Kitamura's seat. If this continued, he might start thinking that what had happened the day before had just been a dream. What he needed now was a reality check from another witness.

"Hey, Kitamura... that one's really something, all right." While calling out to Kitamura, Ryuuji lightly jerked his chin towards the group of girls. Kitamura also took a glance at the commotion surrounding Ami and the others, and sighed as he gave a strained smile.

"Yeah. She really knows the tricks to manipulating people's hearts."

"...So why didn't you tell us she was transferring in yesterday?"

“Huh? I didn’t tell you?”

“Don’t play dumb. Seeing her here was a major shock, for real.” Ryuuji sat on Kitamura’s desk, keeping his voice low as he told off his friend. The gaze he aimed at Kitamura held a vast and terrible power, but, of course, Kitamura knew that wasn’t on purpose.

He scratched his head lightly and laughed. “No, sorry. How should I put this... I wanted people to get a chance to see Ami’s real personality. That was why I didn’t want to tell Ami that you and Taiga were in the same school as her yesterday. If I *had* told her, I knew Ami would stay totally in character and try to fool the both of you.”

“...You say that like she *wasn’t* totally in character.”

“She showed her true self to Taiga, didn’t she? And because of that, you saw it, too.”

“So, what, are you trying to blow her cover? If people saw her true self, they’d just hate her, wouldn’t they?”

“I’m not going to just go ahead and *tell* them. I don’t have the right to do that. But I still think it would be good if they found out. It would be better for Ami than living a lie. And if people end up hating her, I think she’d accept it.”

“...I don’t understand what you mean when you say she’d accept it.”

“You don’t? Hmm, let me try putting it more simply...”

He took off his glasses. As he cleaned them with a cloth, he looked straight up into Ryuuji’s face with his surprisingly large eyes. “I don’t hate Ami’s true self. I’m actually rather fond of it—and I don’t want her to have to lie anymore. I think she should just be who she is. These days, when she tries to pass off her act on me, I get a little disappointed, too... When she started modeling, she suddenly began using that goody-two-shoes act on everybody, even me. Anyway, I think it would be great if there were more people who liked the *real* Ami. That’s all.”

Kitamura’s righteous eyes burned with idealistic fire as he looked at Ryuuji. For some reason, Ryuuji couldn’t manage to answer out loud. But there was just one thing he wanted to say.

Definitely not gonna happen. That was all there was to it.

The drink vending machines could only be used at lunch break, but that was fine, as long as you weren't caught by a fussy teacher. The second-year classroom was especially close to the second floor of the detached building where the vending machines were located, so there was never any shortage of people breaking the rules to use them.

When Ryuuji took some change and left the classroom after third-period math class, his goal was that forbidden hydration. He also had room-temperature tea he brought from home, but for some reason, the day had been stressful. If he didn't treat himself to at least this much of a break, he wouldn't be able to handle it.

He quickly walked through the deserted hallway and stopped at the landing of the detached building in front of the three side-by-side vending machines. *Do I want canned black coffee or something carbonated?* Then, as he stingily counted his change and came to a decision, it happened.

"Me first!"

A quick white hand darted out from under Ryuuji's armpit, blocked his palm, and put money into the coin slot. At the sudden interruption, he turned in surprise.

"...Oh..."

And then he was even more surprised.

"Heh heh, to think there were vending machines in a place like this!"

The innocent smile of an angel blossomed near him.

The one so sweetly smiling up at him was the root of all his stress—Ami. She tilted her head and made her eyes sparkle. "Takasu-kun, I wonder what you were going to buy. I'll try guessing. Hmmm...it's this one, right?"

Of all the various items in the display, she pointed with her cherry-blossom-pink fingertip at the energy drink with the most gaudy illustration.

"Huh?! ...Well...um...I was thinking maybe a coffee." He was so

discombobulated that his voice went up half an awkward octave.

Ami just nodded once. “Right.” She prodded the coffee button. Then, after the can noisily rolled out, she turned to Ryuuji and held it out to him. “Here. This is on me. I saw you leave the classroom and ran out to follow you.”

“Huh? Wh-why?” He didn’t have a clue what was going on. He froze in place, and Ami simply placed the can in his hand.

Not answering, she once again put coins in the slot. “I wonder what I should get... maybe this?” Hesitating a bit, she pushed the button for unsweetened tea.

He came back to himself at the sound of the can dropping, but it was too late. “Oh, wait a second! Use this, buy it with this!” Frantically, he tried to give her his coins, but Ami had long since started getting back her change.

Then she raised her head. “I already bought it.” She stuck out her pale tongue and made a mischievous expression, raising her eyebrows.

“No, that’s not okay. I can’t let you do that! Take this money for the coffee.”

“No, no, it is too okay! Take it as an apology for yesterday.”

“An apology...?”

“Hey, how about we drink here?” No sooner did she speak the words than she quickly opened the can’s pull top. Without waiting for Ryuuji’s reply, she brought the prohibited drink to her lips. Now that she had done that, he couldn’t just leave the girl, not on the first day after she’d transferred.

“...Buying a drink outside of lunch break is against school rules.”

“Is that right? But look who’s talking. You were the one who came out here to buy one.”

“...That’s true. Thanks... cheers.”

Ryuuji couldn’t do anything but also start drinking his coffee. While the two of them drank, the corridor returned to silence. The only sound was the gloomy hum of the vending machine’s motor.

Ryuuji looked at Ami out of the corner of his eye. He couldn’t speak first without revealing his awkwardness. He just didn’t know what to talk about. And

in times like this, another student or a stern instructor never appeared to save him.

“Hmm... it’s cold. Refreshing—good stuff!”

Ami ended up starting the conversation, wiping her mouth with the tips of her fingers. She leaned against the vending machines, close beside Ryuuji.

“You know, I was really surprised to find out that you were in my class. And Aisaka-san is here, too... For some reason, Yuusaku didn’t so much as say a word about that yesterday.” *Right?* She smiled at him.

But all Ryuuji could do was nod ambiguously back at her, expression frozen. Though of course his *eyes* ran wild. Regardless of Ami’s true nature, being alone together with an incredibly pretty girl he barely knew had by itself stolen away his ability to move.

But, Ami seemed to take that a certain way. “...Hey, Takasu-kun.” She shifted from beside Ryuuji to look straight into his face. Her softly lit eyes rose up. She faintly fluttered her eyelashes and whispered, “...I wonder... did Aisaka-san maybe *tell* you anything the other day...? I can’t control what she might have to say about me, of course...but I want you to forget about yesterday. That...goes for Aisaka-san, too.”

“Y-yesterday? What do you mean?”

Ryuuji took a desperate step back, too nervous to face her straight on. He pushed his back into the vending machine, as though trying to forcefully sink into it.

Ami ruined all that effort with a simple half-step forward. She wasn’t afraid of him and his terrifying eyes at all. And what she meant by “yesterday” was probably the trilogy of the restaurant, the slap, and the great bawling that followed.

“Takasu-kun... did you hear from Aisaka-san what happened?”

Ami’s searching eyes grew moist, like a certain Japanese commercial’s doe-eyed Chihuahua. Suddenly, she looked close to tears.

Ryuuji’s mind went blank as he did his best to think of a reply. Eyes averted,

he looked as far away as possible from Ami's sad, beautiful visage. "N-no...I haven't heard anything," he muttered, as seriously as he could manage. He couldn't let himself be fooled! *Even though she makes you want to reach out to her, the fragile angel in front of you is a fraud.* Trying to remember that, he also reminded himself that his reply wasn't a lie. He had seen everything with his own eyes, so he hadn't actually *heard* anything from Taiga.

"...Really? I thought she might have told you something, but...I guess I was wrong. In that case, I'll tell you myself... everything that happened yesterday was my fault. Aisaka-san isn't at fault at all."

Still resembling that teary Chihuahua, Ami gently closed her eyes.

"I think that...probably, because I'm a little oblivious, I made Aisaka-san annoyed... When I was talking with Aisaka-san, she suddenly got super emotional, and I didn't really understand it, but she started saying stuff like that I was disrespectful and getting carried away...and I went into a panic. I was like, *Huh? Huh? What happened?* Like that was all I was thinking...and then..."

The nerve of this girl! I can't believe she'd go this far twisting the story around to make herself look good, and be able to tell it all with an expression like this! He remembered the chill that had come over him the day before, but for the most part Ryuuji just felt astonished. So astonished that he accidentally sighed.

"So! Aisaka-san isn't at fault!" Ami interrupted him, shaking her head back and forth. She dialed up the waterworks to eleven. "If I...I... If I had just...been a more put-together person... That's why I want you to forget it. That...actually... really...happens a lot... other girls suddenly say weird things like that to me...a lot. So! I don't mind it at all, not in the slightest! It's fine! I'll do better!"

Because I'm the victim! That's what Ami was telling him—appealing to him with her whole being. And just then, the school bell started ringing. Ryuuji had been so stupefied by Ami's performance that he felt quite literally saved by the bell.

"Th-there's the bell. We have to go back to class... go on, drink up. I totally get everything you were trying to say."

Yeah, I understood, all right. Basically, the reason Ami had come to this place was to absolve herself of blame, and to tell him to keep his mouth shut.

As though swallowing his feelings of doubt, Ryuuji chugged his coffee in one gulp.

Ami smiled in what looked like complete satisfaction—and then her eyes momentarily narrowed. “Right, if we don’t hurry, we’ll be late for class!”

Like him, she gulped down her can of iced tea in one go. Throwing the cans in the trash, they started running down the hallway side by side.

“...Hey, Takasu-kun. Just now, that was a promise, okay? Don’t tell anyone else, okay? And also—I’m really sorry for crying yesterday.”

Ami really put those Chihuahua eyes to work. Ryuuji decided to go along with it, if that’s what it took to trick her. He nodded several times. “I got it... I got it, okay? L-look, let’s hurry.”

In order to shake off the fatigue that had suddenly started building up in him, Ryuuji continued to run in front of Ami.

Because of that, he didn’t see it. He didn’t see Ami behind him, when she snorted: “This guy’s too easy.”

But even if he noticed, he probably wouldn’t have been too surprised.

“Why did you and Kawashima Ami come hustling back to class together?”

It happened just as the instructor turned her back to write on the board.

The person next to Ryuuji had tossed him a note written on a scrap of paper in pink ballpoint pen. There was no name on it, but he had seen that nervous handwriting before.

When he looked at the seat close to the center of the room, *bingo*. Lips pursed thin, deep in a sulky mood, Taiga looked right back at Ryuuji. Eyes detached and cold, Taiga mouthed the word *reply* with high-handed hauteur.

Am I her servant now or something? He didn’t even know how to write down what had just happened, and he didn’t want to get caught up in their feud in the first place. Ryuuji made sure Taiga could see exactly what he was doing when he stuffed the scrap into his pocket. He pulled his textbook towards himself. *I’m not gonna reply to you*, was the point he was trying to make.

But out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Taiga readying a submarine pitch.

“...Eep!”

By then it was too late.

It was too late, but he was saved.

By coincidence, Ryuuji had been holding his leather pen case as he scratched his head. A still-quivering mechanical pencil was embedded in that pen case like a dart. If not for that, the pencil would have been quivering right in the middle of his temple. The four other students who had the misfortune of sitting between Taiga and Ryuuji were all bending backwards with scared-stiff expressions, looking at the path of the bullet that had grazed the tips of their noses.

“H...how could you do something like...?”

She was trying to kill him. That girl was trying to kill him! But Taiga’s expression was indifferent.

She muttered, “Tsk... so close.” She cracked her knuckles, watching Ryuuji with cold and apathetic eyes.

Glaring at Taiga with the eyes of a rabid dog, he swore firmly to himself that he would *never* give her a reply. Whether he was dealing with a split personality or simple violence, to Ryuuji it was all the same. They were both about the same amount of trouble.

He could see Taiga mouthing complaints toward him at a glance, but he didn’t feel like humoring her in the least. First of all, if he simply told Taiga what Ami had just said, he could see it fanning the flames of their underhanded competition.

He decided to completely ignore her. Casually, he built a defensive wall at the edge of his desk using his textbook and notebooks. That ought to block any attacks from the troublesome thug.

But something happened several minutes later. When the teacher once again wasn’t looking, a folded note once again dropped onto his desk, this time from

the person in front of him. Thinking it was Taiga again, he was just about to throw it away, when...

“...Oh...”

To Takasu-kun

From Minori

When he found those words, the sound of something that wasn't quite a sigh escaped from his throat. When he looked, over on the opposite side of the room, in a seat adjacent to the hallway, Minori was turned his way. She gave a small wave, as if to say, "Heyyy!"

Still speechless, Ryuuji frantically turned the note in his hands, and then opened it carefully with trembling fingers. *Don't tear it... don't mess it up...* For the first time in his life, he had received a letter from the girl he liked. It was just this small scrap of paper, but it was still the treasure of a lifetime. He thought he would remember this moment of this day forever, even when he was an old man.

But...

"Bad Takasu-kun! Minori is angry with you!"

What's with this opener...? Ryuuji swallowed bitter spit with a gulp.

"I heard from Taiga, but it seems like you're doing something suspicious with Transfer-chan?! I told you before on the rooftop, but if you dump Taiga...there will be CONSEQUENCES! 🏴‍☠️"

...And that was the first half.

It was a letter from the first person he ever had a crush on, and there was a skull in it. *But!* He overcame the absurdity of it and continued on to the second half.

"I'll at least admit that Transfer-chan is really cute for sure. But something that's perfect isn't always fun, 'kay? And if you want proof, my ever-insatiable Minori radar (the cutie-sensing antenna) isn't picking up anything this time around."

In the end...Kawashima Ami is interesting, but...this means...basically...that Taiga tattled. She wasn't just violent, but also a coward. He glared at Taiga from the side of his eye, but Taiga coldly looked the other way, completely ignoring him. Her back hit him with an oppressive aura that all but shouted "You're the one who's in the wrong here."

With nowhere else to aim his frustration, Ryuuji clamped down on his dry lips, cautiously cutting out a neat square from the edge of the paper. For now, he needed to just put aside all his objections to Taiga's behavior and respond to Minori.

To Kushieda

From Takasu

“I’m not actually doing anything suspicious with the transfer, and besides, there’s nothing between me and Taiga.”

After writing those methodically-placed words, he pondered a few more.

“And sorry for completely changing the subject, but what do you think about someone who calls themselves oblivious?”

And that about topped it off. For some reason, asking for Minori’s input seemed like a good idea. And wasn’t there a saying that writing only one sentence made it seem like you were angry? The right way to keep a text message exchange going was to always put in a question. Even though this wasn’t texting.

He throbbed with feelings, as though he were about to burst, but he hid them behind a scary face as he handed the guy in front of him the reply note. Each time the teacher was writing or looking at the textbook, the note made its way towards Minori step by step—finally, several minutes later, it was safely in her hands.

He was pointlessly nervous as he carefully watched her open the note. He didn’t know what in the world she was thinking, but Minori slowly turned to Ryuuji and stood up. The teacher had her back to them and was absorbed in writing a long phrase on the board, but Ryuuji, Taiga, Kitamura, Ami, and all the other students looked straight at Minori in surprise.

Minori closed her eyes, and with a serene expression worthy of the crucified Christ, she slowly, slowly brought up both of her arms. Her dead man’s expression slowly, slowly approached a smile. Then, she made a large circle above her head with her arms...or so he thought for a moment.

Bwah!

Her face grimly contorted, and she opened her mouth as if to shriek. Suddenly, furiously, she crossed her arms. It wasn’t the circle of approval. It was the X of failure.



“Uhhh, so, therefore...”

When the teacher turned around to face them, Minori was casually sitting in her seat like nothing had ever happened. A giant question mark seemed to float above the heads of all the students in their collective confusion.

That X mark was an answer to the second part of the note, right...? Ryuuji (being Ryuuji) contemplated the ramifications. It was fine, as long as she hadn't given him that X for the first half.

That's when it came to him. Actually, *she* was the kind of person you'd call oblivious.

Ami-chan is so beautiful, but she doesn't even realize it! And she's so easy to talk to! She's a really good girl, right?

It didn't take long for that to become the standard opinion of the class.

Quite a few people tried to help Ami on her first day as a transfer student. Ami replied happily to each and every one of them. “You'll teach me? Thank you!” “Oh, so that's it! What a relief, you really helped me out by telling me!” “Aww, I'm happy that I'm getting to talk to everyone, too!”

She wore a sturdy, smiling mask. She spread her love indiscriminately, pouring out a too-pure angelic dazzle.

The ones who knew Ami's true nature were Kitamura, Ryuuji, and also Taiga—all three of them—but it seemed Kitamura was trying not to interfere except when necessary. Likewise, Ryuuji didn't feel it was necessary to advertise Ami's split personality on purpose. He didn't want to be involved any more than he already was.

And then there was Taiga.

“...Gimme something to drink.”

Taiga, who made a bad-tempered, sullen face as she unlawfully occupied the seat across from Ryuuji.

Lunch break was half over, and she had come to return her empty bento box.

She was probably thinking of sponging a drink off of him.

“You know what, I keep telling you to wash your bento box before returning it, don’t I?”

“And I keep telling you that the school sponge is gross and moldy and I don’t want to, don’t I?”

“And I keep telling you that I have new sponges stocked up in my locker, don’t I?”

“And I keep telling you that it’s a pain, don’t I? ...I don’t want to wash dishes at *school*. I don’t! What, are you ticked off about something?”

He turned his intense gaze on Taiga. “Oh, come on. Nothing comes to mind? Nothing at all? ...Tell me, why’d you go and give Kushieda a bunch of weird ideas?”

He still ended up handing the tea bottle he brought from home to Taiga. Taiga took off the lid (which doubled as a cup) and poured the tea.

“It’s because you were doing something weird. And besides, I didn’t *say* anything. I wrote it. ...Hey, which part of the rim did you put your mouth on?”

“...around that mark.”

“Even if the chances are low, I don’t want to drink from the same place as you.”

With narrowed eyes, she stared at Ryuuji dubiously.

“...God help me!”

With much sarcasm, she dramatically closed her eyes and drank from the cup.

If you’re that worried about it, you could just wipe it. You’re just complaining to get on my nerves. And come to think of it, you’re comfortable enough eating appetizers off the same plate as me. We probably already exchanged spit a long time ago!—but if he said that to her now, she would probably kill him in three seconds flat.

“So...what were you talking about? You went off somewhere with Kawashima Ami, didn’t you?”

“You’re going on about that again? Jeez, you’re relentless.”

“Only because *you* won’t answer!” In a rare moment, Taiga’s face lost all composure. She raised her voice—“Oh nooo!”—and the cup, still in her hand, splashed tea all over the desk. “Ryuuji! Tissue!”

“Gah, what’ve you done now...?”

Exasperated, Ryuuji wiped the desk and let out a long sigh. He started by squeakily taking care of the soaked parts, then wiped down the whole thing from corner to corner. Tea was good at cleaning up grime, at least.

This wasn’t the first time he’d encountered Taiga’s klutziness. He was pretty well acquainted with it already. But he didn’t want to be involved in her fight with Ami. He also didn’t want Taiga to be this angry, and he’d *also* already endured enough of Ami’s scheming over the break.

“...Taiga, what was it you said when I was preparing dinner yesterday?”

“Huh? Was it maybe... ‘Slice the tuna reaaaally thin...’”

“Not that. About Kawashima. You said you wouldn’t take the low road; you would be an adult and forgive her.”

“Oh. I didn’t say that! ...Or, well. I guess that’s not true. I did say that.”

“I think you had exactly the right idea. Now, there’s no need to humor her—but forget about yesterday, and don’t go near her again. Just go about everything like usual. If you don’t cross her path again, then you honestly won’t have any reason to get mad at her, right? And she didn’t do anything to you... today, at least.”

“...Yeah...that’s true... That *is* true...” Taiga grumbled and became silent. Eventually, the prickle in Taiga’s eyes faintly softened. Things would probably be all right like this. Even though she was infamously called the Palmtop Tiger, Taiga still didn’t want to hate anyone by choice. If she could be calm in her heart, she wouldn’t cause any trouble.

“Well, let’s go and clean the bento box,” Ryuuji said.

“...Huh? I said I didn’t want to.”

“Don’t be stupid. Do you realize what temperature it is? Can you use a bento

box a second time if it's full of rotten food? Wouldn't you hate that? I know / hate that. That's why I'll wash mine now. I guess you'll just have to put up with whatever happens to yours."

"Why? You could just wash mine while you're at it."

"It's not an issue of labor, it's an issue of the soul. If someone makes lunch for you, you wash it and return it. During the spring and summer when it's hot, you clean out your bento box. Otherwise, before you know it, it'll be full of mold. Bacterial rot stems from negligence! The only bacterial cultures I love in this world are in lactic acid, natto, and our mouths and guts."

Bleh, Taiga grimaced.

He tried forcing the bento box into her hand. *Here, stand and do it, just stand and do it!* Then he tried making her stand. Finally, when he'd managed to get Taiga's butt to move just five centimeters off her chair...

"Takasu-kun! That was fun just now, right?"

Why is this happening?! he wanted to yell.

"Oh, hey."

"It'd be nice to have a long talk like that again sometime."

Emerging from the ring of girls, Ami purposefully stepped right over. Her target: Ryuuji. She lightly waved her hand and freely gave him a beautiful, tacked-on smile. Her simple uniform suited her smooth, long limbs so well it was nearly criminal. Never mind whether you wanted to call her cute or beautiful; to Ryuuji, she existed in a category that far surpassed those choices. She had transcended to what he had to call a split personality.

...Or at least, that's what he thought.

"...Hey, um...it's about that secret from earlier."

"Y-yeah?!"

Suddenly, Ami was unexpectedly close. Ryuuji had no idea what she could be thinking, as she bent her slim body in even closer and brought her lips beside his ear. At the heat of her breath tickling his skin, Ryuuji's pores started running full blast. Then, with a sickly sweet voice, she whispered...

“...Um, that one thing that happened. Really, could you just forget it...please?”

She whispered softly into his ear, even though Taiga, the person in question, was right before her eyes.

Taiga was speechless. She motionlessly stared at Ami and Ryuuji with a look that was well below freezing.

Once Ami had done that, she released her lips from Ryuuji’s ear and giggled softly—she showed him her sad eyes and a brave smile. Then, quietly, she turned to Taiga. Her gaze was hurt, full of pity, but also affectionate. Her long eyelashes cast a faint shadow on her cheeks, and even Ryuuji couldn’t help but be entranced by them as he stared.

“...I should get ready for class.”

Taiga’s voice brought him back to himself. *Oh no, I let her charm me again...! No, I was careless. I let her trick me again!*

After dragging Ryuuji back to reality, Taiga forcefully pushed her bento box into his chest. *Thump*. She stood from her seat.

We’ve avoided a fight for now. Ryuuji sighed in relief, but only for one moment. A terrible development: Ami followed after Taiga.

“Hey,” she called out.

It was no figure of speech—Taiga’s hair literally rose.

“It was really a surprise...that we were in the same class, I mean. So, y’know, this is just my impression after this morning, but...Aisaka-san...do you not have any friends other than Takasu-kun?”

“Shut up, you spoiled brat. Do you want me to make you cry again?”

...This was bad. They had only crossed paths for a moment!

Everyone else—other than Ryuuji—didn’t notice the momentary glares they exchanged in the instant of their confrontation.

They immediately turned their faces away from each other and started walking off in completely opposite directions. It would be fine if that was the end of it, but...Ryuuji pretended not to feel the foreboding shiver that ran down

his spine.

This was the moment. The two of them had acknowledged each other as enemies.

The fuse was lit.

Chapter 3

On the surface, several days passed calmly without incident.

Taiga was (as always) subtly on edge, and continued to completely ignore Ami. Ami, maybe because she was so desperate to put on a good act for her new friends, followed suit and didn't try to goad Taiga into a fight. She'd just occasionally give Ryuuji her Chihuahua eyes but didn't deliberately try to get him involved.

However, they were both still in the same class as someone they couldn't stand. When they crossed paths, when they heard each other's voices, when they nearly collided by chance—it wasn't like they didn't quietly glare at each other or have a brief confrontation. But Ryuuji didn't think he saw Taiga and Ami directly exchange words a single time in these last few days.

I hope it could somehow stay like this all year... no, I hope this lasts until graduation. That small hope Ryuuji held was crushed by what happened in the latter half of May, as they were about to change their seasonal uniforms.

"Takasu! Are you free right now?! I've got something really great to tell you!"

Homeroom had ended. It was late in the afternoon, after they had been released from school.

His black-framed glasses glinting, a hand running through artfully mussed hair, Noto approached Ryuuji's seat with an ecstatic expression on his face.

"Today, Haruta's going to introduce us to three first-year girls from the track team, all at once! You're gonna come with, right?!"

"...Nah, I'll pass. I have some things I need to do. Besides, even if I went, they'd just say, 'look at that creepy guy!' and it'd end at that. Or they'd all just run away on the spot, and it'd end before it got started."

"No way would that happen! You'll have me and Haruta on your side. We'll cover for you, man! C'mon, c'mon, let's go, we're meeting at the McDonald's in front of the station!"

Maybe he was just that happy, but Noto wore a giant grin, hands glued to Ryuuji's back, hopping up and down like an especially stupid rabbit.

Ryuuji simply removed Noto's hand. "I really do have something to do. Here, look over there."

He pointed to the doorway of the classroom. Over there was...

"...Guh, the Palmtop Tiger. Y-yikes, man..."

Taiga loomed with crossed arms, oblivious to how much she frightened the passersby. She was glaring at Ryuuji. The wrinkles on her forehead gave off an unspoken pressure that said—*get your butt over here*.

"She asked me to do something for her, so I'll pass for today. Sorry."

"Aww, man...that's no fun. C'est la vie, I guess. We'll compete three versus two. Since you're facing the Palmtop Tiger though, I guess we've got the better odds."

Noto gave up and was turning on his heel, but then he hesitated. "...Speaking of which, Takasu." Suddenly he was turned right back around again, looking strangely thoughtful as he muttered. "The Palmtop Tiger's nice, and... well, she's super pretty, and when I see you two together I'm honestly a little jealous. But I don't think you'll be *happy* with her. Do you really see yourself sticking with a brute like her, who piles up three desks and chairs just to throw them from one corner of the class to the other?"

The comment about the desks and chairs probably referred to the "Ryuuji and I aren't dating" incident from the month before.

"...Why do I have to be happy with Taiga? That's not what I was going for in the first place."

"Well, that's fine. If you say so! But let me at least give you advice. Wouldn't it be better to date a girl who's not just cute, but *normal*? I'm not saying you gotta date someone like Kawashima-chan who's a super-ultra-high-quality gal, but at least try a girl who's not a tiger."

"If I could do that, life would be easy, is that it?"

"Well, anyway, I'm just saying to keep your eyes open. If you keep going on

like this, you won't be able to date anyone else because you'll be taking care of the Palmtop Tiger your whole life. Well, see you tomorrow!"

After getting out everything he wanted to say, Noto lightly walked out of the classroom. Ryuuji still wasn't planning on straying from his pursuit of Kushieda Minori when it came to finding another cute and normal girl.

Come to think of it, how rude! Of course he didn't plan on taking care of Taiga his whole life. At the right time, with the right girl—Minori, if he had any say in the matter—he planned on settling down in marital bliss.

"Hey, Ryuuji! When I said we'd go right away, just how many hours later did you think 'right away' was?! Just how slow do clocks run in your world?! You're not turning into a hippie on me, are you? Hmph...hippie! Feh!"

"...Okay, okay, okay..."

Ryuuji shrugged his shoulders while Taiga shouted and stomped, then obediently trotted over. He immediately found himself getting hauled off down the hallway.

"Look here! It's just the worst! What should we do?!"

"Th-this is..."

The scene Taiga pointed to made his blood curdle. *What circle of hell is this...?*

The student lockers were all lined up in the hallway, but then Taiga's locker at the very left edge was left open and completely drenched in strawberry milk. Inside, her tracksuit, textbooks, dictionaries, and various other things were all soaking in light-pink milky liquid.

And of course, Ami...was not the culprit.

"How could you let this happen?! It's unbelievable!"

"It wasn't on purpose! I couldn't help it!"

She'd done it all by herself. Taiga was a klutz who'd go down in history.

While Taiga was trying to get ready to go home, she'd headed to her locker, drinking a carton of strawberry milk through a straw. Then she'd opened the door—planning to leave behind the textbooks she didn't need—and slipped.

She'd sprayed the strawberry milk into her own locker.

"This work...is going to be more backbreaking than I thought...!" Ryuuji muttered to himself in a low voice, but his eyes started to take on a dangerous, glinting light. The thrill that went down his spine burned with hot ambition.

First he would take everything out...then take home the tracksuit and wash it...if he didn't wipe them down and make sure the textbooks and everything dried completely, they'd get smelly...then he could work from corner to corner...thoroughly...thoroughly!

"Do you think this stuff can be cleaned?"

"...Uh...I think so...I mean, I'll try, at least..."

Ryuuji put on the rubber gloves that he always kept prepared. His youthful cheeks flushed with lively blood. Even though he griped, even though he groaned, he lived for this. He liked cleaning. He liked going from corner to corner. He liked being thorough and getting the job done. Seeing something that at first glance had been destroyed and dirtied beyond repair, then resurrecting it with his own hands? It made him feel, more than anything, that he had found his calling. The proof of that was the island kitchen in Taiga's condo. When he came across it, it was covered in mold; even the drain was clogged. That smelly, swampy sink was now so clean you could lick it. Every now and then, he'd mop and clean up the surroundings of that simple, modern kitchen. Ryuuji prided himself on the results. It was the most well-kept stainless steel in the world.

And now, it's your turn... With a dangerous, enchanted gaze, Ryuuji looked up at Taiga's locker, eyes full of fire. But this time, he wasn't just filled with the desire to clean.

"Taiga...it's a promise, right? You'll give me that thing we talked about."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Fine."

Ryuuji, I did something completely horrible. When she asked him to clean for her, she really had promised it to him. Ryuuji had been eyeing it from the start: the large, still-sealed Hermes box...that contained two fluffy, brand-name bath towels. *I'll give them to you in exchange for the cleaning,* she'd said.

“Ohhh, the coveted Hermes towel...! I don’t care if people think less of me. If I can put those orange Hermes towels away in my closet, I’ll endure any criticism! I saw them in an interior magazine once and wanted them so badly...”

“R-right, well, knock yourself out...”

“You’d better realize that I’m eyeing your Egyptian linens, too! You have a whole bunch that aren’t even open yet, right? I saw them when you had me organize your closet the other day. If there’s another incident like this, that’s my price.”

“Is that right...? I’ll be waiting in the classroom.”

Taiga couldn’t handle sticking around Ryuuji when his housewife sensibilities were going at full blast. She gave him a cold glance, flipped her long hair, and went into the classroom.

With that out of the way, this was now Ryuuji’s turf. Eyes glinting like a beast’s, he tried to start his work, but—no! He needed his apron. He headed towards his own locker.

Humming all the while, he pulled his ever-ready apron from his immaculate locker and cheerfully put it on—then suddenly he had a thought.

Did I really turn down meeting first-year girls to clean?

Does that mean...could that mean...?

“...But...I would’ve normally...turned that down...anyway...”

Once he came to that important conclusion, he nodded deeply. He loved cleaning, after all.

Ryuuji loved cleaning so much that he wasn’t even surprised.

This definitely wasn’t him throwing away a chance at a girlfriend in order to take care of Taiga—definitely not. He was just cleaning up something that Taiga had made a mess of. Taiga had made an unbelievable blunder, and he was just picking up the pieces—that was it. He just wanted to be by her every day so that he could instantly cover for her. So Noto was wrong.

...If you keep going like this, you won’t be able to date anyone else because you’ll be taking care of the Palmtop Tiger your whole life, was that it?

The implications of what Noto had said were completely wrong. That wasn't it; that wasn't what this meant. He wanted to stay by Taiga's side in the future to get every opportunity to clean. That was all he was thinking. If he kept following after Taiga, she'd keep on making mistakes as naturally as breathing, and she would always get something dirty.

As he came to that conclusion, like a dangerous addict, Ryuuji panted heavily and started taking out Taiga's stuff. As with any kind of addiction, he might have been unaware that he was caught up in it.

It had been nearly an hour since he started cleaning—no, it was a little longer, now. The people who would have looked at him strangely as he had his head stuck in someone else's locker and started a massive cleanup were long gone. The hallway had become quiet, and Taiga was likely the only one left inside the classroom.

"It's almost done..." His muttering reverberated in the small space.

He had reached the best part of the job. Ryuuji was deep into the locker, wriggling the Q-tip in his hand back and forth in the corner like he would with a lacquer box. Chances were that spot had nothing to do with the strawberry milk, but what was dirty was dirty, period.

Then he heard the soft sound of footsteps down the hallway. It seemed to be a girl. If he were caught inside the school building without anyone around, they'd probably have a shock. Ryuuji, coming back to himself, completely hid himself inside the half-closed locker and held his breath. But when he saw the person walking past the locker from just a few centimeters away, he almost made a sound.

That unmistakable beauty could only be Kawashima Ami. But Ami, still unaware of Ryuuji's presence, went into the classroom where only Taiga remained.

He had a bad feeling about this. A really bad feeling.

The phantom of the locker quietly crawled back out, and though he hesitated about whether to go into the classroom, he decided to at least peek in through

the classroom's window.

"No way... why are *you* still here? You're such an eyesore."

Ryuuji's forecast was right on the dot. The end of Ami's sentence dripped with disdain. Ami aimed a gaze of pure contempt at Taiga, who was busy wiping her textbook. Ami's lips distorted into a sneer. For the first time in a while, Kawashima Ami-san (the real one) made her appearance.

Taiga, still in her seat, narrowed both her eyes in annoyance. She cut off Ami's words, her voice monotonous, emotionless. "Don't come near me, you spoiled brat."

But Ami showed alarm for only a brief moment at that quick, upward glance from Taiga. "Hmph!" She turned her face away.

That was when Miss Split Personality really went off.

"Ooooh, so scaaaary! As expected from you, Aisaka-san. I mean, even the teachers think you're annoying, right? I was just at the staff room asking questions about class, but all the teachers think that I'm just the cutest, and they're all so happy I came to this school. They keep asking me, are you getting bullied by Aisaka? They drop your name soooo much! Everyone, and I mean *everyone*! It's so *funny*! But, you know, it's annoying, too. No matter how cute I am, they don't need to speak a word about that—I already know."

"...Huh?" Taiga snorted and laughed at Ami's words. A smirk formed on her rosebud lips. "Sounds good. That means I get to enjoy seeing how long you can keep up your gross split-personality act. I'm looking forward to seeing how hard you work. Oh, I hope you realize that changing classes and graduation won't be the end of it. I'll *always* be close by. Watching."

"...Huh?"

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it, to seeing when you slip up and show your bad side. I'll tell you something—it'd be *easy* to expose your true personality. But that wouldn't be fun, so I won't. I'll just keep watching, and keep enjoying the show. But...you should probably be careful of what comes out of your mouth. You still have a lot of your life ahead of you... that is, if you want it to be a long one." She spoke in a low, singsong tone.

For a moment, the classroom was dyed black, like it lay under a curse. But Ryuuji knew. Taiga still wasn't actually angry yet. This was just her teasing someone she didn't like with the tips of her claws... he knew it from the calmness of her eyes and how her whole body was relaxed. If a tiger got angry, it wouldn't be content to go only this far. The barrage of its attacks wouldn't stop until it completely tore apart its prey with its claws and teeth.

But Ami didn't know the rules. She didn't know when to quit. "You...stalker!" It seemed that Taiga had really gotten to her. As Ami shouted those sharp words, her face contorted, revealing the depths of her disgust.

Their exchange heated up the whole classroom until it overflowed with tension.

Any second now, I should probably walk right in, like nothing's happening. Ryuuji gulped down a breath.

"...Haha! You sure know how to get on my nerves, shrimp." Ami flipped her hair, composure regained. She smiled, back on the offensive. "Maybe that's why you don't have any friends? You're just a lonely, wretched, tiny little girl, just absolutely *pitiful*. And to think, when I found out we would be classmates, I even tried talking to you as good-girl Ami-chan. What a shame. Really, it's too bad you couldn't become friends with a popular girl like her... Heh, and it looks like Takasu Ryuuji is totally smitten with me, isn't he? That guy's eyes are always boring right into me. It's a bit much; maybe you could have a word with him?"

Now that she'd said *that*, Ryuuji couldn't go into the classroom anymore. And hey, what did she mean about his eyes...? That was just how his eyes were. It was just genetics!

"Ignorance sure is bliss. ...Hey, could you just hurry up and go home? When I see your creepy mug, it makes me wanna hurl."

"Oh, I'm going home, but not because you're telling me to. Unlike a certain spoiled shrimp I know, I've got places to go, people to see. It's hard being popular! ...Really...I kind of pity you. Because out of everyone I know, Yuusaku has the biggest heart, and he hates you."

"...What did you say?" Taiga's voice lowered dramatically. An aura close to the

color of blood radiated from her eyes as she slowly turned them Ami's way. Ami had stepped in it now, all right—onto a landmine.

“Thinking back to the first time we met, I was like, huh, Yuusaku didn't say anything about this girl being a classmate... And when I asked him, 'who was that girl?' he said, 'no one in particular.' He didn't even want to talk about you. And if I'm being honest, Yuusaku's enemy is my enemy. I told him eeeverything that happened in the restaurant, so he probably just *hates* you now. If you're hated even by Yuusaku the philanthropist, then you're really done for.”

That was what she spat out.

Then...

“Well then, see you tomorrow!”

Holding her bag, she smiled happily. When she turned around, those beautiful features didn't show any trace of her poison. *Humhummm ♪*, she merrily hummed as she walked away.

“A-wh-wh-wha...?”

Ryuuji suddenly made a dash for it. He just barely threw himself into the locker in time.

It might have been better if he hadn't hidden himself, but he was committed now. He waited until he couldn't hear Ami's footsteps anymore, then timidly stepped into the hallway.

“Ta...Taiga.”

He checked on Taiga from the window.

Taiga, who'd been left behind, still had her back facing Ryuuji. Her head slowly tilted. It seemed she was considering the meaning of the words Ami had thrown at her.

And he hates you.

Didn't even want to talk about you.

Yuusaku's enemy is my enemy.

So he probably just hates you now.

You're really done for.

"Wuh... wuh... waaaah!"

She looked up to the heavens.

She wailed in a shaky voice.

"...That...that...bi—!"

"Hey, Taiga! Pull yourself together!" When he desperately called out to her, Taiga turned and jumped. When she noticed Ryuuji on the other side of the window, she leaped up in a single bound, grabbed his jacket sleeve, and pulled him close.

"Ryuuji!"

"Yeah?!"

Her eyes were unable to focus on anything. They seemed to be spiraling.

"Ryuuji, Ryuuji, Ryuuji, Ryuuji! Did you hear that?! Were you listening just now?! Were you?! What do you think about it, about that, that, that...do you think it's true?! Is it true?! Does he hate me?!"

"W-wait, calm down! Of course not, take a second to actually think about it!"

"But then, that brat, sh-sh-sh-she said that K-K-K-K-Kitamura hates...me! Wh... whaaaaugh!"

Ryuuji felt like collapsing. Now, Taiga had really snapped. Taiga kicked over three nearby chairs in succession, bared her white fangs, and then turned to the ceiling and let out a deep-throated howl. "Thaaaaat spoiled braaaat! I...I'll kill her right now!!"



“Calm down! Don’t get ahead of yourself, okay? Take a deep breath.”

“SHADDUP!”

“Whoa!”

Taiga’s powerful shout sent Ryuuji staggering back—it was the tiger who wore the pants around here. Taiga started running at full speed. No doubt she was going after Ami, who couldn’t have gotten far. This was bad. If they kept this up, someone would end up dead.

Taiga was headed for the door. Ryuuji dashed out of the hall to stop her, close behind.

“You can’t! Don’t go! Calm...”

“ACK!”

THUD! There was an awful noise.

Ryuuji opened a sliding door. Taiga opened a sliding door. *Opposite* sliding doors.

A full-speed tiger crashed headfirst into the door Ryuuji had moved aside.

It was just way too over the top. Ryuuji took stock of the situation, breathing slowly, stupefied. Like a drunk cat, Taiga just fluttered... two steps, three steps, one step back. “...Owww...”

Ryuuji pretty much shrieked. “Taiga!” He narrowly managed to support her before she face-planted. “S-s-s-sorry! Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine... I’m fine... I’m fine... I’m fi....”

It seemed like it was actually serious. Taiga didn’t seem to even have the strength to insult him.

“Ryu-chaaan, Taiga-chan’s room is dark, and the curtains are still shut.”

Wrapping her hair in a curling iron, Yasuko came into the kitchen barefoot.

Finishing up frying the last breaded pork tonkatsu, Ryuuji scowled. “Really? She’d better hurry up. These are best right after they’re done.”

“Oooh, it looks yummy! I just love me some tonkatsu.”

Together, the parent-child pair stared straight at the three servings of tonkatsu that sizzled so deliciously in front of them. Although their faces didn't look alike, they were thinking the same thing—*if we don't eat quick, it'll get cold.*

Ever since the after-school mishap, Taiga had behaved oddly.

It seemed like she'd hit her forehead pretty badly, but there wasn't any blood or nausea or any other worrying symptoms, and eventually, she returned to peak condition. *Where were you looking? Were you trying to kill me? That's a lot of guts for a dog!* And on she went—classic Taiga.

If she was in a bad mood, that was fine, but she seemed too...*dark*. If Taiga were normally like a firework that had gone off accidentally, after the mishap, she was now more like a piece of poisoned fruit, melting from the inside out. After a word or two of complaint, she pretty much went into a heavy silence. She didn't once open her mouth until they got to her condo. She didn't even talk about Ami.

It wasn't the same as ignoring him. She wasn't shunning Ryuuji on purpose. It seemed more like she was deep in thought, and because she was deeply lost inside those thoughts, her reactions to the outside world were dulled.

And then, at half past six in the evening, even though it was time for dinner, she hadn't arrived at the Takasu place.

A pair of chopsticks in one hand, Ryuuji crossed his arms, looked down at the tonkatsu, and muttered, “Maybe she's not feeling well? And then went to the hospital...by herself? If that's the case, I shouldn't have let her force herself to go home. I should have just taken her straight to the hospital...maybe I shouldn't have been frying the tonkatsu this whole time.”

“Nooo, I have a feeling there's someone in there. I sense a certain something coming from the window,” Yasuko declared, busy holding a gaudy dress up to herself as she looked in the mirror. “I'm sensitive to the presence of girls. Inko-chan thinks so, too, right?”

The bird that had suddenly been brought up in the conversation made a

vacant, idiotic face. “Huh...? Oh, yes,” Inko-chan chimed in with a strangely human-like response.

Inko aside, Yasuko’s hunches were usually right in times like these. She was, after all, a self-proclaimed “slight psychic.”

“Ryu-chan, if you’re worried, why don’t you go and get her?”

While saying that, Yasuko settled on her clothes, hung them off the top of the doorframe for the time being, and continued to do her hair with her right hand. With her left hand she poked her phone, skillfully texting away. Around this time of night, she would always noisily multitask in the Yasuko style—dressing while taking care of her business mail.

Guess I have to. Ryuuji nodded at the tonkatsu. It wouldn’t help to just keep worrying like this, and he couldn’t have Yasuko wait when she was working staggered hours.

“Then I’ll go over for a bit. Once you’re done with all that, don’t forget to eat.”

“Ooh la la!” When his own mother replied with an enigmatic, sexy pose, Ryuuji averted his eyes and left the house. He slipped out the front entrance, still in his t-shirt.

His sandals clanged against the iron stairs as he made his way down into the town’s early summer evening, already in twilight. The sky was dyed a striking indigo dappled with deep red, and the crosswind was serene.

He felt as though his chest, which had been breathing in the pungent odor of fried food inside the apartment, was now clearing up. Ryuuji took a deep breath. As the ample oxygen went to his head, his unnecessary worries became even more vivid.

Moving forward, just how were Taiga and Ami planning on getting through their days if they had to share the same class? Were they going to keep having underhanded contests in the small classroom, chipping away at each other’s HP until one of them collapsed? What was the point of that? It was an unfathomable world that Ryuuji couldn’t understand whatsoever.

On foot, it was one minute—or really, ten seconds. He went through the palatial condo’s familiar marble entrance.

Ryuuji’s worries still weren’t exhausted. If anyone looked closely, they would be able to see the two girls didn’t get along, and he knew that their meeting had been more than awful. But still, he couldn’t help but have one thought. Since they’d become classmates, for the sake of keeping the peace, wouldn’t it be better if they were more considerate of each other’s feelings?

In his mind floated the form of Taiga at her most brutal, bluntly glowering with passionate, murderous intent. Beside her appeared the ill-natured Ami, turning away in disdain with a smirk on her lips. If Taiga was the Palmtop Tiger, then Ami was a Chihuahua of high pedigree, one that was only friendly to its owner. It would bark to provoke, and when it came across danger, would jump into the arms of its owner (Kitamura) and stick out its tongue. And it would probably be dressed up in tiny brand-name doggy clothes or something, too.

“...That works way too well.”

Imagining the tiger and Chihuahua confronting each other sapped all his strength. Exhausted, he hit the intercom doorbell. For a while, he waited, but no one answered. Tilting his head, he tried again, then again.

Yasuko’s intuition couldn’t be off, thought Ryuuji (who was just a little bit of a mama’s boy). He tried one more time. Then...

“...Who is it?”

Who are you?! He wanted to ask, as Taiga’s dull and gloomy voice reverberated through the door.

“It’s me. Hey, the food’s done, so come on down. It’s *tonkatsu*.”

“...I don’t need any.”

Suddenly, a powerful madness lodged in Ryuuji’s sharp eyes—he wasn’t angry, he was surprised. Taiga, whose appetite he could always depend on to be limitless, was saying she didn’t want to eat her food? It was even worse than he’d thought!

“Hey, is there something wrong? Are you not feeling well? Does your head

hurt?”

“...You’re annoying. Nothing hurts.”

“If you skip a meal, you’ll collapse again.”

Her small body wasn’t exactly efficient, and if she missed a meal, Taiga immediately lost weight and her blood sugar plummeted. Knowing that, Ryuuji put more effort into sharpening his tone of voice. “Anyway, for now, open up! I won’t stop giving rations to someone who doesn’t explain why they don’t want to eat.”

Silence, then a faint click of the tongue. Finally, the auto-lock door opened.

“...Yo.”

He was on the first-class condo’s second floor.

Ryuuji inadvertently bent backwards and groaned as he saw the face of the person who slowly opened the oak door and peeked from behind its frame.

“Wh-what happened...?”

“...”

Taiga was speechless, under the blanket that covered her head. Her lacy cotton dress was a mess. Her hair was horribly tangled, hiding her head. The one eye he could spot was red and gummy—her cheeks were also completely wet. It seemed she had been crying here by herself.

Taiga was a creature that cried regularly, but still... “H-hey. Wait.”

Pulling the blanket with her, Taiga went down the high-end beige hallway to return to the living room. Though he hesitated, Ryuuji removed his shoes and followed after her.

Behind the heavy glass door was a magnificent living room over twenty tatami mats in size, with an interior that looked like it was pulled straight from a foreign magazine.

“...Ahhh...” Ryuuji murmured, scratching his head.

On top of the rug that the sofa was also on, there was a mounded mess of

sheets and blankets from the bedroom. In the middle was a hollow big enough to fit exactly one Taiga. She squatted down in it, settled in completely, and balled herself up. Once she pulled down the blanket currently draped over her head, the Shut-In Tiger would be complete.

She didn't have the crystal chandelier on, so only the dim recessed lighting shone, casting a soft glow from the ceiling. Taiga had been in her dim room like this the whole time, clueless as to the color of the sky beyond the closed-off curtains.

"...Hey."

"..."

In pure gloom, she'd balled herself up like this.

There was a moment of hesitation. But Ryuuji made up his mind and flipped over the top of the couch. Ryuuji held his knees and sat down beside Taiga, who was hiding in her nest like a baby cub.

"Hey, what's wrong? ...Does it hurt where you were hit earlier? Do you want to go to the hospital?" After all, the attacker happened to have been Ryuuji. Maybe it was a little invasive, but he couldn't *not* check on her.

But without answering, Taiga remained balled up in her tiger cub pose and pushed her head into the sheets.

"...Are you okay...? Come on, answer me..."

Eventually, he heard a voice like a mosquito's buzz. "...Hey..."

"Hm?"

"...I wonder if...Kitamura-kun...actually *does* hate me now?"

Her covered face turned to the side. Through a gap in her hair, he got a peek of her teary eyes, colored with desperation. Totally serious, Taiga looked up at Ryuuji with a firm gaze.

He let out a long, long breath. "Is *that* really what you were worried about?"

"Well..."

"I told you, right? Kitamura saw everything that happened at that restaurant.

He knew you were provoked into doing that, and he knew what Kawashima was really like to begin with. And you're the one who would know best of all that Kitamura wouldn't hate anyone for something like that, right? Don't go getting depressed over something this small."

"...You really think so...?"

"I do."

"Then why am I so short?!"

"Huh?!"

That question was a surprise attack! Ryuuji didn't normally make a pastime out of thinking about why someone else's body was the way it was. For a few seconds he was struck dumb.

"Uh...probably because of, like...DNA...your genes...and stuff..."

It probably wasn't too far off the mark, but it came out awfully half-hearted.

But Taiga continued speaking in a low voice, "...I'm a shrimp...and my name is weird...and I can't do anything by myself." She cut herself off and went silent.

That was new. It seemed she wanted to do something about that immense name, so unusual for a girl, and the small stature that gave her the Palmtop title. Now that she said it, he realized something obvious—Taiga was always greedily drinking milk products. Was she trying to inspire a growth spurt?

"I had no idea that you worried about something so trivial."

"...It's not something trivial! Unlike you, I'm sensitive."

She rubbed at her eyes with her small fists. Taiga finally got herself up and sat next to Ryuuji. He hadn't seen it because of her hair, but she had a cooling patch stuck on her round forehead. She might have developed a bump. Ryuuji felt a sting in his heart, and mostly subconsciously, gently rubbed the patch. Taiga didn't push his hand away.

"...What... just because you're 165 centimeters tall..." Taiga pouted and muttered, eyes dipping slightly downwards.

I'm a little taller than that, Ryuuji thought, then he realized what she meant.

She wasn't talking about him.

"...And just because her name's like Sailor Mercury's... Because of that, because of that...!"

This was about Kawashima Ami.

With a well-proportioned figure and a cute name like an anime character's, she was the ideal girl, who had both things Taiga wanted—that was Kawashima Ami's existence to Taiga.

Of course, Ryuuji breathed in. The reason why Taiga was gloomily grumbling like this was because, on top of worrying what Kitamura thought of her, Ami had triggered a self-confidence crisis in Taiga. The ill-natured girl she hated had all the things she couldn't help but want. On those points, she could never win... there wasn't a soul alive who wouldn't want to squat in a dim room and shut themselves in when faced with that.

Ryuuji could understand that frame of mind. He nodded knowingly. "And she's also a childhood friend of Kitamura's. And their whole family is close, too."

"Augh...!"

...I know, I know. He'd tried to support her by saying he understood.

But Taiga's miserable face turned into the picture of melting ice.

Oh, shoot. I hit at her worst anxiety...

Now he finally understood. Even if Ami was well-proportioned or had a cute name, Taiga wouldn't have become this depressed as long as Ami hadn't been close to Kitamura. Taiga had gotten to this point because Ami had the most important advantage over Taiga. Her efforts to get the thing Ami had that she didn't have all been in vain.

Ryuuji finally realized his mistake, but it was already too late. Like a broken jack-in-the-box, Taiga deflated back into her shut-in corner. In the end, she closed the blanket top right up.

"...How can you be so *barbarically* insensitive...? I'm just flabbergasted!" Her low voice was equal parts reproachful and muffled.

"Yeah, and *I'm* always flabbergasted when I see the way you live your life."

“WHAT?!”

At Ryuuji’s slip of the tongue, Taiga simply snapped. She sent the blanket flying as she leapt up.

“Hey, you’re looking better.”

“Just what. About me. Leaves you flabbergasted?!”

“W-well, that’s! Exactly! Wait! Whoa! Ah!”

His words were interrupted by cushions being thrown at him from above, from below—to the left, to the right.

“You! Jerk! You dog! Mutt!”

“Hey! Watch it—watch the—the dust! Stop! Oof!”

“Shut up! Be quiet!”

And then...

“Ha...haaa...CHOO!”

“Whoa! Whoa! ...Yuck, your snot’s *everywhere!*”

She moved on from physical attacks to spiritual humiliation. When he was nearly beat by her counterattack... *rumble rumble*... Taiga’s stomach roared like the shaking of a fault line.

“Oh.”

She opened her eyes wide, stopping her attack. She looked down with a face of pure wonder at her own stomach, as it echoed with that terrible sound.

“What on Earth was that noise just now?”

“Don’t just say ‘oh!’ It’s the sound of your own gut! ...Jeez, so you are hungry after all. Here, let’s eat the tonkatsu.”

“...I told you I don’t need any.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna take your stomach’s word for it over yours. Yasuko needs to leave soon, too, so here, stand up.”

“...Is it Berkshire?”

“Yeah, it’s Berkshire.”

“...Will you eat the fat?”

“Yeah, sure.”

With a reluctant look on her face, Taiga finally stood from her blanket nest. First he had her blow her nose, then he had her check that the windows were locked. At Ryuuji’s direction, Taiga took the key and put sandals on her bare feet, and then finally, he was successful in leading her out of her condo.

They walked slightly apart, under a sky that was a shade of indigo just a little prettier than before. But while they were heading up the neighboring stairs, they were interrupted.

“Ryu-chaan!” Yasuko’s tearful face peeked from the entryway. It seemed she had dutifully waited for the two of them and hadn’t eaten a bite. “How are we supposed to eat tonkatsu without the sauce?!”

She had chopsticks in one hand, waving the empty sauce bottle as she gave her son that most shocking news.

Making a sudden change of course, Ryuuji and Taiga rushed to the closest convenience store. Ryuuji went straight to the sauce shelf and Taiga went selfishly to the magazine rack.

“Hey, we’re in a hurry, so let’s go!” After paying for the sauce, Ryuuji swung the convenience store bag to lightly tap Taiga on the butt. Taiga sullenly turned.

“I know that already. Don’t touch my butt, you perverted dog. Just a little bit more...here.” The fingers that were rifling through the pages stopped. Then, she pulled Ryuuji (who had gone out of the store ahead of her) back in by the edge of his T-shirt. “Get a load of this.”

She showed him the page.

What is it? Ryuuji turned around and unconsciously stopped walking when he saw what was on the page. “...It’s Kawashima Ami, isn’t it?”

On the lower part of the opened page was Ami in her regular clothes, with her own attached sidebar. In it was written this:

Because of matters relating to school, Ami-chan will be taking a break from this month's edition. Look forward to reuniting with her soon!

"So... she's taking a break?"

"Because she moved here? ...I wonder if our school was worth it..." Somehow, he had his doubts. "Well, we don't have time for this. If we don't hurry and get back, Yasuko will be late."

After putting back the magazine, they jogged out of the store.

It happened when they were taking a short cut through the parking lot to the road...

"...Hm?"

"...What's that?"

Nearly simultaneously, they both saw something strange. They stopped walking once again and automatically turned to look at each other.

A little ahead of them, they saw an odd-looking, mysterious woman go into the convenience store they had just left. She was clothed completely in a black tracksuit with a face mask over her mouth, and even though it was night, she wore sunglasses and a big cap. But those long and slender limbs, the silkiness of her exposed black hair, her elfin face, and her stellar figure could all only belong to the one model in the whole town—the one they had just seen in the magazine.

As expected, Taiga was also scowling unpleasantly.

"That's...that's who I think it is, right...?"

"...Well, speak of the devil, and all that... What's with that getup?"

Her extremely strange disguise only made her stand out more. If this were Hiro or Azabu or some larger town, she might have melted in and looked like an entertainer trying to retain her privacy by hiding her face. But on a residential street like this, you might be mistaken for a convenience store robber with an unusually good figure and arrested if you were unlucky.

Ami went into the convenience store looking like that, and took a basket like an ordinary person, but everything after that was astonishing. She started

systematically grabbing and throwing snacks and ice cream from the shelves into her basket with terrible force. Then she got bento, toppings, snack bread, a diet drink in a plastic bottle, and soda, too. Even the employee behind the register was leaning over and watching her behavior.

“Talk about weird... is she having a party or something?”

“No...that’s not what this is. Hmph, so that’s it... how interesting.” Laughing slightly, Taiga started walking quickly ahead of him. It seemed she had come to a conclusion all by herself but didn’t feel like sharing it. “Ryuuji, let’s run.”

“Oh, sure.”

Now that she mentioned it, they were in a hurry. For now, they set aside the spectacle they’d just seen. Ryuuji and Taiga headed down the asphalt road towards the Takasu residence, where tonkatsu was waiting.

But during that time, Taiga seemed strangely happy and broke into a sly grin.

Chapter 4

At the center of the most attractive cluster of girls among the students of class C were...

“Ami-chan! I saw the magazine you were in yesterday,” said Kihara Maya. The other girls had praised Maya after break for lightening the color of her long, straight hair, but she’d received discreet disapproval from the boys.

“It said you were taking a break from modeling for a while, but was that true?” Kashii Nanako, the second member of the two-girl pair, had strangely attractive moles around her small mouth.

They came as a set. The two girls made a duo more gorgeous than the sum of its parts. When they talked to Ami, several other girls gathered around, as though drawn in by the activity.

“Maya-chan, I can’t believe you and everyone else looked at this month’s edition! I’m so flattered! But it’s true, I’m taking a break from work for a while.”

Ami had climbed to the apex of this, the most eye-catching group of girls in the class. Now, she lavished the girls clustered around her with her dazzling smile, at which they went into a loud chorus: “What a shame!”

There was another group, too. They sat spaced out, staring at the commotion.

“Somehow, I feel like the cuteness of the girls in our class suddenly went up by a standard deviation... Yeah, forget the underclassmen, the girls in our class are the best.”

“I know, right?! It’s kind of like, you know what kind of people they are, and that familiarity grows into love. This is the royal road, boys. Ahhh, when I got put into this class in April, I was feeling blue just thinking about what it’d be like with both Takasu and the Palmtop Tiger around, but I was super lucky, now that I think about it... Maya and Kashii are in the class, and then best of all, Ami-tan is here... And if you’re only considering her looks, the Palmtop Tiger is super cute, too... everyone’s cute! Everyone!”

With Ryuuji in their midst, the bespectacled Noto Hisamitsu and the

frivolously long-haired Haruta Kouji narrowed their eyes in happiness. Ryuuji's own eyes squinted while he pretended not to hear. Sewing kit in hand, he used tightly-packed stitches to mend a detached cuff button. *If you can think that, then you really are in heaven*, he thought, but of course, he was a peaceful observer. He wouldn't dare say something like that aloud.

Incidentally, Noto and Haruta told him they had gone out with the first-year girls that day, but the girls ended up coercing the two of them to treat them to McDonalds, karaoke, and a whole bunch of other things. In the end, the boys didn't get so much as a phone number, and the girls ended the arrangement with the decisive words: "What a treat!"

As Kitamura was passing by, Maya flagged him down. "Oh, it's Maruo. Hey, don't you think your childhood friend's wasting her talents? This whole take-a-break-from-modeling thing?"

Kitamura, who was affectionately called "Maruo" by the girls, turned around and pushed up his glasses. "I think it's fine, I guess? Yeah, it's fine by me, precisely because it was Ami's own decision. Once she finishes school, she can easily start again."

"Whaaat! But she's so *cute*! It's definitely a waste. Maruo, you're too cold to Ami-chan! And don't say 'precisely!'"

That's right, that's right! Shrill voices surrounded Kitamura, but he cheerfully laughed them away without a trace of contempt or anger. Kitamura was the girls' darling to the bitter end.

At Haruta's whisper, the unpopular, bespectacled Noto had a doubtful expression. "...Man, he sure is popular, but he's so modest about it... I have glasses, too; maybe I ought to put them on..."

"Yes, yes," Kitamura said with a wry smile. He shrugged his shoulders and scurried out of the ring of the cutest girls in the class.

"Oh, it seems like everyone is here." He stopped by Ryuuji and the others, looking like they'd just saved his life.

"Damn it, go home, you aristocrat! This is a crab cannery ship—proletariat only!"

“Yeah, what a good punch. Aim for the world.”

Shrugging off Haruta’s attack with a smile, Kitamura just set up camp next to Ryuuji. If the group surrounding Ami was the sun, the assembly of four boys could probably be called a shadow.

“But it really isn’t a waste at all.” Ami’s cheerful voice was outstandingly bright and resonated through the classroom. “I wanted to enjoy a regular high school life like this. So this is okay. And I’ve made soooo many friends! I’m actually the happiest I’ve ever been right now, and it’s because I’m with all of you!”

How can you be such a saint? You’re an angel, Ami-chan! The surge of voices from among the girls was almost a sigh of wonder. Inadvertently, Ryuuji stole a glance at Kitamura’s well-kept profile. Although Kitamura kept joking around with Haruta, for a brief moment, Ryuuji thought he saw him release a faint sigh.

“Yeah, I see. Being a model must keep you awfully busy, and all the dieting and stuff seems hard, so you couldn’t really be a normal high school girl and keep on doing it.”

Nanako nodded, and Maya agreed. “Right, right!” She opened her already large eyes wider.

“I always wanted to ask you, Ami-chan—you’re super thin. You’ve been dieting, haven’t you? Is there a special diet all you models follow? C’mon, give us the deets!”

“Yeah, I want to hear, too!”

“Huh? Ami-chan’s diet? I want to know!”

When the topic reached the subject of diets, the ring around Ami grew even larger. Once again, the girls became wildly enthusiastic. “Oh no,” Ami muttered, laughing a little. “I really have no idea! I’ve never had to go on a diet! It seems like I’m just blessed with a great metabolism, so I just eat whatever I want to eat, and as long as I’m eating healthy, it works out okay. I love eating snacks, and it’s better for your skin not to stress yourself out!”

Then she smiled.

The edge of her mouth might have twisted with very slight sarcasm.

“...Metabolism,” someone muttered quietly.

“...Hmmmph.”

“...So that’s it.”

“...No special diet, huh?”

“...Wow.”

Ami must have noticed. The temperature around her suddenly dropped three degrees.

Maya’s mouth froze. She had been patiently enduring an oolong tea and salad lunch every day for nearly half a year.

Nanako’s eye twitched. Just the day before, she had been desperately working out by walking, and she’d even foregone the sushi her dad had gotten her last evening.

No matter how much she tried to keep up her good girl act, Ami’s true identity had made a brief, impulsive appearance.

The other girls’ gazes became so cold that even Ryuuji could see it.

That was the moment it happened.

“...I can’t just ignore this!”

Clack! One girl noisily scooted back her seat. Her angry voice shook the cold air with a growl.

Her temple was crisscrossed by visible veins. She cracked all her knuckles as she slowly made her way forward through the silent classroom.

Her name was Kushieda Minori. That hardcore girl, never satisfied by club activities alone, jogged the not-at-all-short distances between home, school, and work every single day.

“Because even though I don’t look like it, I’m a diet warrior!”

You gotta be kidding me. Ryuuji tilted his head quizzically. Hadn’t she eaten a bucket of pudding on her own just last month...? But she seemed to be telling

the truth. A rare flame of real anger was burning in those eyes that were always smiling. And then, beside Minori was...

“...Taiga. You’re with me, right?”

“Yeah!”

Aisaka Taiga, tied to Minori by their strong friendship, swayed like a wild animal. Ryuuji suspected a diet should have been completely irrelevant to someone like her, but Taiga was the type of girl who would lend a helping hand or two for a close friend. Even though she’d eaten two whole servings of tonkatsu.

“Let’s go, Taiga!”

“Hey, Minorin! You’re on deck!”

“Okay, Taiga! Batter up!”

They both suddenly spread out both their arms and quickly sidestepped into the ring of girls.

“Huh?! Wait, wh-what are you doing?!”

They forced their way right into the center, where Ami sat alone. Although the other girls squealed in surprise, there was a strange cold-heartedness to the way they all suddenly backed away. Soon enough, there was no one left to protect Ami. Taiga and Minori’s coordination was perfect. With their naturally good reflexes, they closed in on their target. At the moment she attempted to get up and run, they circled behind her, cutting off her escape.

“What do you want from me?!”

“Bwahahaha! Do you think we would allow you to escape from our defenses, my dear girl?!”

“Feeling sorry you called me a shrimp? If you’re not yet, you *will* be, calling people weird names like that!”

“N-names?! What are you talking about?!”

The glimpse Ryuuji caught of Ami’s face showed confusion, puzzlement, but she seemed helpless before the impenetrable wall that was Minori and Taiga.

She could only weakly sway from side to side on her feet.

Is it really okay not to help her out here? Ryuuji checked on Kitamura, trying to read his expression—but Kitamura was gawking, mumbling to himself in surprise like an old lady. There was no sign he'd be getting up to intervene any time soon.

"This is bullying!"

"The Palmtop Tiger and Kushieda are bullying Ami-tan!"

Ryuuji realized that although the three were the center of attention, not one person was lifting a finger to help Ami.

"Shall we start? Kawashima-kun?"

Kushieda's lips twisted into a devious smirk. Taiga went around to Ami's back and put her slim body into a full nelson.

"Stop, wait, what are you—stop! *Eyaaaah!*"

Ami's shriek echoed through the classroom. Minori had struck fast as a snake. She turned out her hands, stuck them under Ami's blazer, and forcefully grabbed Ami's hidden stomach.

"...Ho ho...! What have we here?"

"Ugh...!" When Minori smirked, Ami's expression stiffened with fear.

Minori slowly licked her lower lip. "Teaaaacherrr! Kawashima-san is hiding *fat* in her beeelllllyyy!"

Minori had gone over to the dark side. She kneaded the soft fat she'd grabbed. "Oh no no, noooo no no, noooooo! We can't have this! You know the rules: If you're bringing in fatty food from outside of school, you can't bring more than 300 yen's worth! Do you really expect me to believe this is just 300 yen of flab?! What are these *handles*?! Do I feel a banana under there?! Maybe you lucked out—bananas don't count under the rules!"

"S-s-s-stop, stop, stop, stooooop!"

Minori violently wriggled both her hands underneath the uniform. The boy's cheeks all flushed red, their collective imagination soaring right into forbidden

territory.

“Ohhhhhh, you’ve got quite a bit stocked up in here, don’t ya?!”

“Stop, stoooooooooop!”

“What’s that you said about being ‘predisposed’? Then what’s *this*?! Hah! What’s this thing right *here*?! Huh?!”

“Noooo, *stop*! Gyaaahh!”

“Ahhhh hahahaha! This part’s from the meat buns! Ahahahaha! *This* part is from Haagen-Dazs! Take this! Convenience Store Shin Ken: Family Mart Style Gleaming Attack! You are already fat!”

“I’m telling you to stop... Eyaaaaagh!”

Minori’s fists moved in a golden arc. Though it was a little hard to see at first, the belly fat was soon revealed in all its jiggling glory. Minori rubbed her hands in a figure eight over the skin.

Ami’s protracted shriek trailed off before eventually melting away completely, vanishing into empty space.

...*Gulp*. Everyone swallowed their breath in the silence.

Taiga slowly released Ami’s body from the full nelson. The poor fool dropped to the floor on her knees. Bereft of strength, she stayed there, still speechless.

Minori put her fist to her heart and looked up to the heavens. “We dedicate this victory to diet soldiers everywhere, whose tears come down to us as falling stars!”

“Uwah... wah... wah!”

Finally released, Ami clutched at her disheveled clothes and miserably collapsed, sprawled on her side. She hung her small, flushed face in mortification and continued to sob in a low voice.

Minori looked down at Ami and narrowed her eyes in satisfaction. “...Taiga. Your hunches always pay off.”

As she looked down at Ami in the same way, Taiga was also smiling broadly. “No, no, *you’re* the amazing one, Minorin. You do good work.”

Her eyes glittered with heartfelt happiness as she slowly sauntered up to stand in front of Ami. Her cheeks were rosy with delight, her lips the crimson red of an animal that had tasted blood.

“Kawashima-san. Allow me to introduce you! This is my best friend, Minorin. In fact, I *do* have friends other than Ryuuji.”

“BT-dubs, this is my BFF, Taiga!” Minori raised her hand and laughed.

Then, from Minori’s side, Taiga pointed straight at Ami. “And so now the truth is out—you’re a camouflaged chubster! You eat too much!”

BA-BAAAAAAM!

Taiga’s firm declaration hit home. Ami’s shoulders drooped as though all the strength had left them. Minori and Taiga stood shoulder to shoulder and laughed loudly—*Bwahahahaha!*—as they shared high fives.

“You’re awesome.” “No, *you’re* awesome!”

The two devils whispered to each other, poking at each other’s cheeks as they walked away. Then, finally, they turned around.

“Hey, Ami. Why don’t you try a marathon? A black tracksuit would definitely suit you.”

At that parting shot from Taiga, Ami suddenly raised her face. She might have realized that Taiga had seen her convenience store shopping from the day before. She wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes with her thumbs.

“I’ve been doing marathons and more! I’ve been running and running and running around, you spoiled shr...”

“Ami-chan, are you okay?”

Ami closed her lips firmly and resisted tacking on the “...imp.” *Smile*, it seemed like she was thinking. Somehow, bit by bit, she rebuilt her mask.

“I-I’m fine...”

She smiled at the girls who offered their hands to her. Her resolve could not be dissolved. She had the powerful willpower of a willful powerhouse!

“You poor thing! You’re not fat at all, Ami-chan!”

“It was so scary! Aisaka-san and Kushieda-san are really violent...!”

Though the girls’ words were kind, their beaming faces seemed awfully pleased. Although Ami also smiled as she got back up, she ground her teeth together, toughing out her humiliation. Even that smiling, angelic mask seemed close to crumbling and collapsing.

“Man. Those two are demons...”

Ryuuji filed away his excitement at seeing a new side of Minori somewhere in the back of his mind, but he still couldn’t resist muttering something out loud. In actuality, Ami had probably been let off easy, but the fact was... no matter how you looked at it, they had gone too far. People would pity Ami. But...

“...I see.”

Somehow, Kitamura seemed to have had an epiphany. He nodded slightly. “So, if you go about things that way, Ami winds up like that.”

What does she wind up like? Ryuuji thought, but the chime announcing the end of the break came too quick for him to ask.

Evening approached, and the early summer’s drawn-out daylight finally waned.

Bustling silhouettes came and went along the sidewalks lined with bushy zelkova trees—housewives coming home from shopping, middle schoolers biking home from extended club activities, kids with their dogs, students sporting white earphone cords—all of them in a hurry, walking against the chilly wind.

After finishing their shopping at a congested supermarket, Ryuuji and Taiga also joined that wave of people. Beneath the light indigo sky, they headed to the Takasu residence.

It seemed the events at school had served to dissolve a considerable amount of stress.

“Hmm! ♪ Hmm! ♪”

Taiga, who walked slightly ahead of Ryuuji, had experienced a complete turnaround from her malaise of the day before. She swayed her head from side to side as she hummed a mysterious song. It was rare for her, but Ryuuji didn't say anything. He just followed her with shopping bags in both his hands. If he were to make a remark like, "How unusual," the little rebel would probably immediately stop. Her slightly out-of-tune humming had an odd charm to it.

He heard a small girl passing by ask her mother, "Is that a princess?" To a kid, Taiga's sense of fashion may have really looked like something fit for fairytale royalty. Under her light-lime-green cardigan, she wore an unbuttoned floral-patterned dress. It offered a glimpse of the full, frilly layers of her pure-white lace underskirt. The ample volume of her clothes accentuated the cuteness of her small frame. She even had a ribbon in her long, loosely curled hair, which was rare. Both her small, beaded bag and her delicate white sandals were items Ryuuji hadn't seen before.

She usually had the same look, but he thought she was being especially deluxe that day. She was probably in a really, really good mood.

When it was time for them to go home, she had smiled (!) and told him, "I'm going home now, so when you go shopping, drop by first, will you?" And then, on top of that, she even waved goodbye to Kitamura, who was beside Ryuuji—though, as expected, her cheeks turned bright red and, though her eyes were raised resolutely, she was tongue-tied. Her face was still sort of scared stiff. Kitamura returned a "Yeah!" and Ryuuji saw Taiga jump very slightly.

That had also probably played a role in Taiga's good mood.

"Hey, Ryuuji."

"Hm?"

Taiga suddenly turned around, slowed down, and went to Ryuuji's side, where she matched his pace. This was also something that didn't normally happen. Taiga would walk in front of him, as though she were the head of the family, or she would sullenly walk straight behind him—those were her two normal positions.

In a calm voice, this abnormal Taiga asked him, "Are you going to bake salmon today?"

Ryuuji was almost getting emotional. *This isn't too bad, either.*

“Yaaaah...maybe I'll do it meunière style. I'll salt and pepper it, then dust it with flour, and fry it in butter. It's good with ketchup.”

“Let's go with that! Sounds delicious!”

The calm conversation they were having like a newlywed couple was shaken by what happened in the next moment.

“Oh, maybe I'll make a salad?”

“...” *Whoosh.* The shopping bags slipped from both of Ryuuji's hands. “What?”

Taiga looked up at the wide-eyed expression Ryuuji had on his face, then pouted with discontent. But even so, her anger was a third of what it normally was.

“...N-no...” Ryuuji said. “Ahhh, I had a shock just now...I was probably just hearing things. Yeah. That's it.”

What a shock, what a shock. He picked up the bags and tried to start walking again as though nothing had happened, but things seldom went the way one wanted.

“I mean it! Even I can make a salad!”

Taiga, who rarely even took her dishes into the kitchen after eating, was saying *she* would make a salad. Taiga, the one who had been on the verge of starving to death because a bento shop had gone out of business. Was this real life...? He was at a loss for words over the absurdity of it all. Ryuuji slowly shook his head from left to right.

“I-I can't believe that.”

“Why? You underestimate me.” She chuckled, proudly stuck out her small chest, and stood at her full height. “We did it in a class when I was in elementary school. A salad. The kind where you make your own dressing.”

“...Then try telling me the process.”

“That's easy. First, you buy the lettuce, right? Then you tear off the leaves, right? You shred it up, right? Then you put it on a dish, right? You put on the

mayonnaise, right? ...And voilà, finished.”

“That’s no good.” Ryuuji flatly shook his head. “I know you’re impatient with simple tasks, and the first thing you need to do is *wash* the lettuce, am I right? You need to rinse it in cold water. And what happened to the dressing?”

“Details, details...”

“They’re not just details! Especially soaking the lettuce in cold water. If you don’t, it wilts, and you wouldn’t eat it.”

“...You sister-in-law.”

“What?!”

Ryuuji’s eyes glinted sharply at being called such an inconceivable name. Taiga left him behind, starting to walk in her normal position ahead of him.

“Ryuuji, you’re a total sister-in-law. You’re a sister-in-law who doesn’t want to let the bride in the family have a say in family matters and doesn’t ever let her use the kitchen. That poor bride is me, and you’ll have me clean simple things like the bath and the toilet, and you make me chop wood all the time...”

“Just when did I make you clean the bath or toilet or anything?! You can go ahead and try chopping wood any time you like, if you even can! And just whose bride are you supposed to be?!”

“...”

“Don’t ignore me!”

“Dog-in-law.”

“What did you call me?!”

In the end, they were back to having their usual fierce and useless exchanges. Finally, they turned the last corner. They reached Taiga’s condo and the Takasus’ rented apartment.

But then, at that time...

“Oh, thank goodness I caught up with you!”

The person who overtook them from behind suddenly leapt into Ryuuji’s forward vision. Taiga, who was walking in front of him, disappeared from his

field of view.

“Wh-what is it?!”

Pretty much leaping onto him, she dangled from Ryuuji’s chest. She clutched at him forcefully, but tentatively, with an uncertain touch. She had his right arm trapped.

“I just saw you and ran as fast as I could! Please...pretend we’re friends!”

“Uh...what?!”

The one who was out of breath, the one who had a gloomy look on her white face, the one pushing her slender frame against him—it was the fallen angel. Or not. Out of everyone it could have been, it was the remarkable Kawashima Ami. She didn’t have a cap or sunglasses on, but she was wearing a black full-body tracksuit that day, too. As always, the contrast between her plain clothes and her incredible beauty made her stand out. He couldn’t imagine she was actually running a marathon like Taiga had told her to. But...

“Takasu-kun, please...!”

There was real fear mixed into her pleading voice, and her broken breathing was shallow as well. Ryuuji didn’t understand what she was asking of him at all.

“Um, uh... wh-what is it?!”

“That guy...”

Strength came into the thin fingers with which she held Ryuuji’s arm. Her hand was sweaty and slightly trembling—this didn’t seem like a normal situation. Flustered, he followed Ami’s line of sight.

“...Who’s *that* guy?”

At a street corner just ahead, he saw a figure in the shadow of an electric pole. It was the shape of a man, suspiciously loitering. Ryuuji’s face unintentionally twitched.

Ryuuji hadn’t seen the guy around before. He had a very slight build and was dressed in neat clothes. At first glance, the outfit made him look like a college student, but he sure was carrying a lot of stuff around. He wasn’t what you’d call a “weirdo” at first glance, but he was hiding and standing stock-still, which

definitely wasn't normal. It created a strange mood around him.

Seeing him seemed to have scared Ami, who was earnestly trying to use Ryuuji's body as a shield to hide behind. Apparently, the man didn't mind being found out, since he wasn't trying in the least to turn his stare away from Ami.

This is no act... she's probably really scared. Then, while Ryuuji was still busy holding Ami, at the moment he stepped back... something even scarier stood right behind them.

"You're right, we should just settle this now...once and for all..."

When they turned toward the low voice—muttering so ominously it seemed to curse them—they found Taiga. Taiga, who had probably been knocked over by Ami, had fallen over at the side of the road. Now she slowly got back up.

"I told you to run a marathon, you spoiled brat, but I don't remember anybody giving you permission to run around in front of my house. I'll turn you into a tattered rag."

Taiga waggled one finger and made a fist with her other hand. Both her feet stepped nimbly to the front and back, then from side to side, all in preparation. Her footwork was professional, and her eyes glittered with hunger. She invited the attack: "Come at me."

"...Try and read the room here. C'mon, you get it, don't you?"

Unexpectedly, they beheld the precise embodiment of that old Japanese proverb: a tiger at the front gate (the angry Taiga), and a wolf at the back gate (the weirdo). Ryuuji swiveled his neck one hundred and eighty degrees in one continuous back-and-forth motion. For the time being, he tried to soothe the unreasoning beast beside him.

Not even noticing Taiga's behavior, Ami restlessly tried to flee her pursuer, circling around Ryuuji to avoid the suspicious man's eyes. Ultimately, she said, "I'm scared..."

She clung to Ryuuji's shoulder and pressed her face into him.

In that moment, the pretty features of Taiga's French doll-like face trembled. Slowly, bit by bit, they distorted, like she was being pulled diagonally in

opposite directions. And at a certain point—*SNAP!* Ryuuji was sure he heard something break.

“LISTEN TO MEEEEEE!”

Maybe it was all the excitement, but Taiga had gone off the deep end. She couldn’t even express herself properly. Taiga shouted with all her might. With an astounding display of leg power, she kicked a recycling bin with enough force to make an electric pole collapse. That can should have been far too heavy, but it rumbled as it rotated through the air. It soared over Ami and Ryuuji’s heads, on a beeline toward the suspicious man. It flew several meters and, with a loud roar, crashed down at the man’s feet.

“...!”

The man was as scared as you’d expect. He took several steps back, and turned around right on the spot. Then he made a mad dash for it.

“Huh? ...Who was that guy?!”

Only when Taiga saw his retreating back did she finally seem to notice his existence. At the same time, her built-up rage instantly dispersed. “He looks like some kinda perv!” Utterly disgusted, Taiga threw those words from her lips without a hint of restraint.

Ami finally caught her breath and let go of Ryuuji’s arm, but her footing was still unsteady.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah... this was the first time I’ve really run for real in a while so... ack, I guess my knees gave out.” She smiled as though it were a joke, but that smile was far from her normal perfect one—it seemed incredibly rigid.

“What was that all about? Who was that guy just now? Do you know him?” Ryuuji lent her a hand as he asked, but Ami ambiguously shrugged her shoulders.

“It... uhh... I went to go shopping...and then, I kind of got mixed up with him... I think he’s a fan... one of the *weird* ones. Sometimes I have to deal with guys like that...”

Her eyes wandered, as though she still couldn't quite put herself at ease. Seeing that, Ryuuji and Taiga inadvertently looked at each other. Ami seemed pretty shaken up, and on top of that, when she said "fan," they felt something wasn't quite right. Ami turned to Ryuuji and clasped her hands together.

"Hey, I need a favor. I'm scared of going home by myself from here. That guy might still be nearby... even if it's just for a little bit, would you let me hide at your house? Please!" She didn't ask with her usual good-girl mask, but with her real face.

"...Okay, so you've got two options. A crummy second-floor rental apartment, or the entire second floor of a brand-new top-of-the-line luxury condominium."

"That one!" Ami pointed straight at the condo. Ryuuji checked on Taiga's reaction from the corner of his eye to see what she would do next.

"That's *my* condo. ...But fine, fine, come on. I agree, you should probably hide for a little while."

"Huh... it's yours?! This is no laughing matter! I don't know what he'll do to me!" Ami turned a stern gaze on Taiga. The two of them got along about as well as cats and dogs.

"You're being ridiculous. Don't you understand this is an emergency situation?" Taiga had an incredibly serious expression on her face. She shook her head at Ami, then tightly gripped her hand. "If you wait until something happens, it'll already be too late. Just come to my place."

"Wait, you... A-are you serious? Are you seriously serious about that?"

"I'll have you know that rental is Ryuuji's house. But it has security issues... actually, I managed to sneak in through the window myself to try and kill Ryuuji in the middle of the night. It was easy. Easier than breathing, honestly."

That couldn't be, Ami looked up towards Ryuuji.

"Yup. True story." Ryuuji nodded right at her.

Ami thought it over for a while. "...Are you sure?" She looked up at Taiga calmly—that was right, calmly—with her big, gentle eyes.

Then Taiga nodded without hesitation. "Yes. Of course."

Ryuuji was actually slightly moved, and without thinking, softly muttered, “You’re...a really good person.”

“It’s a unique situation. Even I’m not *evil*.” Taiga smiled generously, then firmly grabbed Ami’s shoulder, although Ami was still acting hesitant. The force Taiga used was just a little concerning.

“Kawashima-san, we’ve been through a lot, but I hereby declare a temporary truce. Ryuuji has a busy mother and an ugly, weirdo parakeet. You were right to choose my place.”

Ryuuji decided to pretend he didn’t hear the rude words about his pet—she was being gentle enough right now that he could forgive that much. Ami still showed some signs of hesitation, but Taiga pretty much dragged her by the shoulders towards the condo’s entrance.

“Oh, hey, Taiga. What should we do about food?”

“Leave some for me, I’ll come over and eat later. I think I’ll move better with my stomach empty.”

Without leaving any opening for Ryuuji to question those mysterious words, Taiga and Ami disappeared into the condo.

Taiga was pretty late to dinner at the Takasus’ place. “...I’m all fired up! This is the best!”

Strangely all smiles and good spirits, she ate one serving of fish and three whole helpings of rice.

Chapter 5

“...**H**uh!”

Ryuuji shuddered and unintentionally threw his head back.

He had gone to school with Taiga, keeping a subtle amount of distance between them as usual. Once they arrived in the classroom and took their seats, Ami approached him. “Thank you for yesterday.” But in the light of that glittering, early summer morning, her face seemed haggard and tired—strangely hollow.

“...Wh-what’s wrong?”

“Nothing...it’s just...” Her voice was also a bit hoarse. Her appearance was completely different from the day before.

“How do I say this... you look...tired.”

“I look that bad, huh...?” Haah... Face plain and pale, she gave a pitiable sigh. Ami pulled up a nearby chair and propped her head on her elbow as she sat at his desk. Melancholy wrinkles appeared on her brow.

“I guess I’m just still exhausted from yesterday...”

And then she planted her face down on the desk. Maybe from shampoo or soap, or maybe even because she was wearing perfume, a sweet smell gently drifted from her.

Ryuuji felt slightly uneasy. Both his eyes gleamed like a beast’s. But he feigned composure, and spoke chivalrously. “Well, you were in a pretty scary situation yesterday. If you’re a little exhausted, that’s just to be expected.”

“It’s not what you think.” Ami suddenly raised her pale face and looked straight at Ryuuji with her glassy, shining eyes. “At Aisaka Taiga’s condo... for about five hours... no, *six* hours...”

“D-did Taiga do something to you?!”

“She had me dance. And sing.”

Dance? ...Sing?

That was definitely not what Ryuuji expected. He tilted his head to one side, baffled.

Ami breathed out. *Phewww...* Her gaze became distant, filled with ennui.

“She threatened to throw me out if I didn’t do what she said...and she made me do...a thing...all night long...”

“Wh-what did she make you do?”

“An imitation medley. One hundred fifty impressions, all in succession. She made me redo them until I got them perfect...*Uganda...Falcon...I want to die...*” Ami groaned, muttering, and put her face back down on Ryuuji’s desk.

From a distance Haruta and Noto were whispering. “Noto-chi! Looks like that guy’s joined the bourgeoisie!” “We better make him rethink trying to associate with us.”

Ryuuji noticed them glaring with envy, but didn’t engage with them.

“...She was merciless...!”

He recalled the smile Taiga wore when she’d invited Ami to her condo—the one he’d assumed was kind. Then he remembered her mood afterwards, when she was munching on the meunière salmon—like a well-fed bear about to go into hibernation. His heart froze.

When he looked over at Taiga and Minori, he saw that she was laughing loudly even now. She was totally in a good mood. Once he got that far, Ryuuji finally had a clear picture. When Taiga was in a good mood, no matter what, someone else would be suffering in her shadow—just like Ami was now, across from him.

What a terrifying person. Ryuuji looked at Taiga’s pleasant profile once again, and then...

“Can I have a second?”

Kitamura broke right into Taiga and Minori’s conversation. Ryuuji couldn’t hear the contents of the conversation well enough to know just what business Kitamura had with them, but there was no mistaking the sudden rise in Taiga’s mood.

He looked at Taiga, who, unable to look at Kitamura, was looking at Minori...

“Matsumoto Seichou... Akechi Mitsuhide...”

Ryuuji looked back at Ami, who seemed to be recounting her extended imitation repertoire. An old writer and a guy from ancient history? How the heck did she do musical impressions of *those* guys?

They’re both like creatures from heaven and hell.

Actually, it was even more complicated than that.

Soon enough, Ryuuji realized his mistake.

“Nuhhhhh!”

During afternoon break, Ryuuji had cheerfully taken his bento out of his bag. Now he cut across the classroom to get the chopsticks he’d left in his locker (which, of course, he *had* to wash every day). But then...

“What are you doing?! Guhhh!”

“...”

He suddenly found himself the victim of a murder.

The culprit was the sullenly silent Taiga. The murder weapon was an ice-cold can of recently purchased oolong tea. As he passed by, she’d forced it against the sensitive nape of his neck. Ryuuji stood on tiptoe and writhed.

“That’s you, right?! If there’s something you want to say just... gah! I just said to stop tha—bwah!”

No matter how much he ran, Taiga persistently and forcefully pushed the cold oolong tea at him. Even now, his squinting eyes made him look about ready to snap. He gritted his back teeth, shifted his jaw, and ferocious wrinkles formed on his nose.

Taiga said, “My heart feels like it’s about to split wide open...!”

“Wh-what?!”

“I’ve got it tough!”

“Arrgh! Stop! *I’m* the one who’s got it tough!”

Finally, he stole the can from her small hand and hoisted it up high enough that Taiga couldn’t reach it. Like a tiger in a zoo that was going stir-crazy in captivity, Taiga paced around Ryuuji.

“I hate it, I hate it...! Why...?!” she continued grumbling to herself.

“What is it, what happened?”

“...Nngh, I hate it, but, but but...”

“Hey!”

“Nyahh!”

Reflexively, he pressed the cold can that was in his hand against Taiga’s nose. Taiga held her face and leaped back.

“What are you doing?!” She stood on her tiptoes, reached out her arm, and pinched Ryuuji’s cheek.

“Owwwwww!”

“Ugh...the grease on your face got on my hand!” Taiga seemed to come back to herself.

“And your claw marks got on my face! Now, hurry up and say whatever’s on your mind, already. What are you so unhappy about?!”

“It’s...”

Nng. Taiga contorted her face in frustration, bit her lip, and took a breath. Finally, speaking softly and rapidly, she confessed what had made her so dissatisfied as to try and murder Ryuuji. “This morning, Kitamura-kun told me... to try and get along with Kawashima Ami. That I should invite her to lunch...”

“Wh...” Ryuuji faltered, blinking once. “Why...?”

“That’s what I want to know!”

Now he understood the feelings motivating all of Taiga’s shouting. No matter what, that invitation wasn’t happening.

Kitamura had seen both their first fight at the family restaurant and the attack

she'd pulled off with Minori. So why would he ask for something like that...? It couldn't be that Kitamura saw any chance of Taiga and Ami getting along. If that were the case, he needed to get his glasses fixed, stat.

"That's... yeah... something nobody would be happy about." Ryuuji let out a low groan and locked eyes with Taiga. She had the world's most pitiful look on her face.

He did think he saw Kitamura talking to Taiga about something that morning, but he couldn't have guessed it was this.

According to Taiga, this was apparently what he'd said:

"I know that Ami has a terrible personality, too. But no matter how much time passes, if she only ever puts on an act, she'll never make any real friends, right? So, Aisaka, because you know her true personality, I want you and your best friend Kushieda to take care of Ami. Please, Aisaka. To me, you're one of the few female friends I have who I can ask a favor from."

So sayeth Kitamura.

"Aaaahh!"

After performing her rendition of Kitamura's words, Taiga's small frame bent and writhed. It looked like there was no way for her to avoid feeling *very* conflicted.

"I want to say no...but I can't... This is no laughing matter... Kitamura-kun asked me... and why is he always worrying about that brat, anyway...?! Uhhhhgh, nnnnggghh, hrrnnnngg..."

Groaning, Taiga held her head and ended up crouched at Ryuuji's feet. Flustered, Ryuuji stooped closer to her.

"Hey, calm down. You'll give yourself an aneurysm or something."

"B-but...! Wait, but... he said we were friends...! We really were *just friends* after all! I'm one of the few female friends he can count on... huh, or maybe that's a good thing? ...No! It's definitely *not* a good thing! But he counts on me... am I happy? ...No, I'm not!"

Ryuuji thoughtlessly breathed in her conflict. He rarely saw anyone this

troubled. He didn't have anything to say; he just watched her for a while.

"Ahhh, but... but, but, but!"

Taiga shut her eyes and latched onto Ryuuji's sleeve. Her fingers tightly gripped him, and she opened her mouth and gasped, breathing in and out. Finally, she gave one big nod, and said "Uh-huh!"

It seemed she had finally made a decision.

"I'll endure the unendurable... I'll suffer the insufferable!"

"...Uh, quoting the Emperor might be a little much...but I think I get you."

As Ryuuji nodded, Taiga stood up right in front of his eyes. With a singular goal in mind, she briskly walked ahead with long strides.

"Come on. Time to eat."

Taiga stood in front of Kawashima Ami, who looked up at her with her mouth halfway open.

Ami held her bento box at her seat and had just been about to stand up. A little ways away, Maya and Nanako were waiting for her. "Ami-chaaan! Let's hurry up and go to the roof!"

"...Huh?" Ami blinked several times, dumbfounded—until finally it seemed she had gotten back in her own rhythm. The smile she gave Taiga was so pure it was downright spiteful. "What are you trying to say? I have plans with Maya-chan and Nanako-chan."

"Shut up."

"...Wha...?!"

Taiga curbed Ami's protest with a shout. Like an animal, she growled at the Maya-Nanako duo.

"Oh, I see. Well, if it's Aisaka who wants to eat with you, I guess we can't do anything about it. Shall we go, Nanako?"

"Yup, it's out of our hands. Well, Ami-chan, we'll see you next time."

Without pondering things too deeply, not even seeming afraid of the tiger's growl, the pair simply nodded and waved at Ami, like there was only one

inevitable outcome. The creature called the Palmtop Tiger was quite possibly a being well understood by the other girls.

But of course, Ami wasn't going to just take it lying down.

"What are you thinking? What did you mean, 'come on?'"

"That you're going to come eat lunch with me."

"Huh?! That's a bad joke! Why would I do that with *you*?! ...Hmph, fine. Even if those two are gone, I have plenty of other friends—"

"Michael Jackson as a tour guide," Taiga unexpectedly muttered. You might think she was muttering to herself, but then Ami went...

"Eek!"

"Mona Lisa taking a corner at two hundred kilometers per hour... J-rock star Tsunku ♂ desperately trying and failing to sing western music... All these spectacles and more sit in the digital camera at my house. And just in case you get any ideas, it's already all been burned onto a disc... off-site backup! The title is 'Performed by That Model: ★ 150 Mysterious, Back-to-Back Impressions.' Someday, sometime, if the whim so struck me, I might carelessly release it to the public..."

"S-stop! Fine! I got it! I just need to eat with you, right?! That's all you want?! Damn!"

Close to tears, Ami forgot to put on her mask. Recklessly cradling her bento box, she transferred over to Taiga's seat.

There, Minori was already on standby. "Hey, Kawashima-kun. I already went ahead and got started without you."

She brought a gigantic ribbon she was holding with her chopsticks up to eye level. It seemed to be boiled konbu seaweed.

"Wh-what is it with you two...? Tsk...you're not making any sense."

"That's enough of that. Please have a seat here, be my guest."

Minori guided Ami to the seat at her left, and with her left arm, firmly held onto Ami's shoulder. "Here, say 'ahh!'"

She brought the konbu to Ami's mouth.

"I'm telling you I don't want it!" Ami kept crying out, but...



“...Mmn...that’s nice.” Ryuuji unconsciously muttered out loud as he watched the scene develop. Being close to Minori like that, having her say *ahh* to him and spoiling him... if only she would gently deliver ribbon konbu into *his* mouth... *Ahh...*

“Takasu, why are you sitting spaced out with your mouth open? Let’s go.”

“...Hm? Huh? Where?”

Kitamura had come to stand next to him at some point and was prodding him in the back. “Over to Ami and everyone. I asked Aisaka and Kushieda to invite Ami to lunch. If I just asked them to do that and then left, what kind of person would that make me?”

“Sure, but what does that have to do with *me*?”

“I can’t just barge into a group of girls eating their bento all by myself! I’m not that kind of guy.”

It’s you we’re talking about here. You’d definitely be fine, Ryuuji thought, but instead he said, “If you insist.” In reality, he was beaming on the inside as he followed behind Kitamura. He felt bad for Taiga, but this was an unbelievable stroke of luck. If he could spend his lunch break with Minori, enduring the sideshow of a tiger-vs.-Chihuahua showdown was nothing.

“Yo, can we join you?”

“Oh, is that Kitamura-kun and Takasu-kun I see? Take a seat, take a seat!”

The only one who welcomed the two boys when they broke into the group of girls was a grinning Minori. Ami was right next to her, brow still furrowed.

“Why? Why do things have to be like this...?” she muttered in dissatisfaction.

Meanwhile, Taiga was completely...

“ ... ”

...speechless. Feeling the presence of Kitamura suddenly sitting at her right, she still couldn’t turn to look at him. Her eyes seemed to melt, as though she were in a trance. Her rosebud lips loosened, but...

“...Tsk.”

Then she seemed to suddenly remember that Ami was diagonally across from her, and she instantly scowled. But then she noticed Kitamura's presence again and drooped—and then Ami's presence made her perk up—and she went back and forth between the two emotions, trying to reconcile them, until...

"A-amazing..."

Finally, incredibly, so remarkably that Ryuuji couldn't help but speak, the right half of Taiga's face turned to Kitamura with an erotically lovesick expression, while the left half wore an unpleasant look for Ami. The left and right halves of her face were completely asymmetrical—a perfect Baron Ashura.

It seemed her face and her spirit had both reached a balanced equilibrium. Taiga didn't try to take on Ami as she ate, and her anxiety over Kitamura wasn't dominant enough to make her hands shake. She was able to smoothly open the top of her bento box. Her face was ridiculous, but whether it was down to luck or something else, not one person in this group was about to comment on it.

"Well, let's dig in. Eating with the girls every once in a while is nice, too."

"...Does this mean that you were the one who planned this, Yuusaku?"

"Hm? Whatever could you mean? Wooow, Kushieda, your bento is as huge as ever! See Ami, look at it!"

"Heh heh heh, even though this bento looks huge, there's practically nothing in it... See, this one's glass noodle, this one's konyaku."

As he watched Minori enjoy proudly displaying her side dishes, Ryuuji reflected on the small joy he was experiencing himself. He didn't mind at all that he wasn't participating in the conversation. Just being by her side like this was enough to make him happy—in fact, it was more than enough.

It had been about a month since the failure of their last "let's eat bento together" plan, but this time it was different. He'd be able to eat bento with Minori after all. *Ahhh, I'm so glad Taiga and the Chihuahua don't get along.*

While deep in thought, he tried opening the lid to his bento, but then stopped in realization. He was about to make exactly the same mistake as last time. The contents of his bento were exactly the same as Taiga's.

Guess there's no helping it... He would have to stingily leave the top in place to keep his side dishes hidden. But...

“Ahh, there really are kids who would do this sort of stuff! Now now, why are you hiding that, Takasu-kun?!”

“Ah!”

Minori suddenly stole his lid. She had exposed his egg omelet rolls interleaved with soybeans, a bacon and onion stir fry, and seaweed on top of rice...a beautifully constructed, handmade bento that was exactly the same as the one Taiga was already eating.

“...Uhh. ...Yeah.”

Minori compared the two bento and paused in thought for a moment. “... Well, um, what was it again...? Hey. Takasu-kun, what's your horoscope?” She casually returned the top.

“M-my sign is Pisces.”

“Well I'm fine with any horoscope, as long as it's not an endoscope. Just kidding!”

Ahahahahahaha!

But subtly, her eyes weren't laughing.

It seemed that Minori had discerned Ami and Taiga's subtle animosity. Instead of provoking Taiga by expressing her doubts over Ryuuji and Taiga's relationship, she had chosen to frantically think of a way to protect the current miraculous balance.

“Wh-why would you talk about endoscopes while we're eating...? And you didn't even tell us your sign.”

“Sooorry! My sign is actually 'out of order!' ♥”

Somehow, those words had resulted in a natural, congenial conversation between him and Minori. Then, at the very moment that he celebrated his good luck, it happened.

Completely unnoticed, Ami's arm reached out across from Ryuuji and

unexpectedly pulled open his bento top again. Unable to react to her speed, Ryuuji just froze.

“Why is your bento the exact same as Aisaka-san’s bento? Come to think of it, you two were together yesterday.”

Taiga’s eyebrows twitched.

At the same time, a hush fell over them, muffling the clamor of the class lunch break.

“...Did you hear...?” “Oh, I heard...” “She took it to the one place she never should have...”

Before long, low, fear-touched voices began surreptitiously whispering.

“Huh? Wh-what? Why did it get so quiet all of a sudden? Did I do something?”

Having just transferred, Ami didn’t know.

A calamitous disaster awaited anyone who asked about the relationship between the Palmtop Tiger and Ryuuji. Everyone in their whole class had internalized this knowledge. That was why, even though everyone wondered what type of relationship the two had...they would never speak of it. The Palmtop Tiger said they weren’t dating, so they weren’t dating. She demanded they never say anything so stupid again, so they never did. But then the newcomer had gone and done it...

In the calm before the storm, no one dared to move their chopsticks. The conversation remained frozen. Everyone had their ears pricked for the Palmtop Tiger’s next move. If they saw signs of her anger, they needed to be ready for an immediate escape.

“...You’re so weird. Does something like that bother you?”

The one who finally, quietly replied was Taiga herself.

Regaining the beauty of her normal, French-doll expression, she spoke in a strangely quiet way in her usual monotone voice. “In that case, if I do *this*, there should be no problem.”

“Ah, my ben—”

Before he could even finish his sentence, Taiga suddenly reached out her hand and stole Ryuuji's bento. She just brought it up to her mouth, and MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH! ...All his egg and his stir fry disappeared in three seconds flat.

Munching with her cheeks completely full, she continued to eat and chew, the food bulging at the sides of her mouth.

"Nuh froblem anahmoar, raight? ...My bento is egg and stir fry. Ryuuji has a seaweed bento."

She returned Ryuuji's now lonesome-looking bento box to his hands. He heard sighs of relief around the classroom, and slowly, the liveliness of their usual afternoon break started to return. It seemed they had somehow averted the Palmtop Tiger's wrath.

The only casualty was Ryuuji.

"But...! My bento is...!"

Despite himself, Ryuuji was about ready to cry at this horrible misfortune. But then a pair of chopsticks were extended across to him, and he was blessed by a solitary meatball.

"Here. Now you have a meatball bento, Takasu-kun."

"K-Kawashima...!"

With an angel's smile, Ami had divided her side dish with him. But still wearing that smile, she mercilessly rubbed salt in the wound. "Hey, why do you just let Aisaka-san walk all over you like that? Does she have something on you?"

I don't know if you would say she has something on me, exactly. I have my reasons...and the timing and stuff just sort of lined up... But of course he didn't manage to say that out loud. He just remained frozen and speechless.

Taiga responded in his place. "You see, Ryuuji was my dog in a past life. So he'll happily wag his tail and do anything his owner asks." She spoke proudly, with a glamorous smile. "That's what brings a dog joy."

...He tried to refute her, but...

"You two are going on like that again—even though everyone knows you're

really star-crossed lovers, bound by fate!”

Apparently, based on whatever obscure set of metrics she was using, Minori thought she could get away with a joke like that.

Ryuuji and Taiga’s breathing synchronized...

“No way.” “No way.”

...And they both shook their heads.

Ami seemed to interpret that in her own way. “...Hmmm. You two are close, then...” She faintly narrowed her eyes, muttering to herself in a singsong voice. And though Ryuuji might have misheard, he thought he caught her faint voice continuing—*this is no fun for Ami-chan~!*

Taiga snorted, looking about done with any attempts to engage with Ami. She picked up her chopsticks and was about to go at her bento again, but then...

“Wow—y’know, Aisaka, you sure do eat a whole lot! I think that’s a lot better than having to diet.”

“...!”

Quite possibly at the shock from Kitamura’s words, Taiga unintentionally dropped her chopsticks.

Regardless of whether she was fat or thin, “you eat a lot” was the same as a death sentence to a girl—especially when coming from someone she was unrequitedly in love with.

Aaah... Ryuuji felt utterly exhausted as he quietly watched Taiga flap her mouth open and closed.

Taiga’s chance to dispel the nickname “gluttony girl” (though no one was calling her that) came after school, immediately after the last bow.

“Heyyy, everyone, sorry! Please listen up for a second!”

Kitamura’s voice echoed around the busy classroom. Those who were beginning their preparations to go home raised their heads.

“Sooo, I think you are all aware that today the student council is holding the

traditional monthly volunteer town cleanup! But this time around, the main force of third years are having their mock exams at school tomorrow, so we have very few participants! I would like to extend an invitation to everyone and also encourage you to please participate!”

...Let's go, let's go home. The students continued to prepare to leave, pretending not to hear as they left in small groups. Naturally, Ryuuji was among them. He didn't dislike cleaning, but this was different. No matter how much effort he put in, the town could never be perfectly clean. He already knew well enough that it would just leave him full of frustration.

This monthly volunteer town cleanup was in actuality intended for those third years with questionable student records—as a route to salvation. If suspect third years participated, they had a special menu of options available when they sought letters of recommendation, from “enthusiastically participated in volunteer activities” to “participated in leadership,” or in some cases, “their effort was remarkable.” And so, other than the student council members, most of the participants were normally third years, along with a few rotating members of the sports clubs whose participation was compulsory. The event was irrelevant to first and second years who weren't in a sports club. No matter how many times Kitamura called for participants, there was no way anyone would bother to raise their hand to join—

“Oh, Takasu! So you'll come!”

“...Huh?!”

A strange phenomenon had occurred.

Compelled by some sort of force, Ryuuji's right hand was being raised up high.

“Great, I'll be waiting. Change into your tracksuit and wait in front of the school gates! This'll sure help me save face with the president... I would have lost a lot of cred if I'd brought no one at all! Right, I already added you to the list of names, so don't think you can back out now.”

In high spirits, pen in one hand, Kitamura sauntered out of the classroom with a spring in his step.

“Wa-wa-wait...hey!”

The one who was gripping Ryuuji's right hand and holding it up was Taiga, who at some point had snuck up to his side. "Hmph!" She stomped. She'd grabbed his elbow, and put his hand high, high up.

"Hey, hands off! Do you realize what you just did?! If I don't go participate, it'll be officially counted as negligence, and I'll get docked points on my extracurricular participation score!"

Taiga let him have his elbow back. Then, in front of Ryuuji's glaring eyes, she started chewing on her fingernails. "I'll take responsibility for it. I'll go along with you."

"Huh? ...Wha?!"

Basically, the point was *she* wanted to participate, so she had taken Ryuuji along for the ride. Embarrassed, Taiga's cheeks flushed a cherry blossom pink. Playing with the ribbon of her uniform with her fingertips, she muttered softly, "I don't want him to think I'm just a glutton... I want him to think that I ate a lot to get energy so I could participate in the town cleanup..."

"...You just want to spend some time with Kitamura, don't you?"

"...That's another way of looking at it..."

"Then you didn't have to bring me into it!"

"But I'm embarrassed! Just use your imagination, you dimwit!"

It happened at the moment he was trying to build up the intestinal fortitude to respond to that horrible remark of hers. He felt a slight prod at the back of his jacket, and when he turned around...

"Takasu-kun, you're going, too! I'm so glad!"

Minori was standing there. She had her bag and tracksuit in hand.

"This time, it's the girls' softball club's turn for compulsory participation. They made me go because I'm president, even though I thought it was such a paaaiiin. We're all in the same boat!"

On this day, too, her healthy smile illuminated Ryuuji's heart all at once with bright sunlight. At the blinding rise in his body temperature, Ryuuji was pretty much entranced. "I-Is that so...?"

“That’s right. But I never could have guessed you would go and volunteer on your own. Yeah, you’re such a good kid! You’ve moved me!”

Whooaaa, she praised me...!

He desperately tried to hide his cheeks in his hands. They felt like they were about to turn bright red. Ryuuji’s eyes were seething, looking murderous. He was embarrassed.

“Minorin, I decided I might as well go, too. Along with Ryuuji.”

“Oh, really?! Well then, let’s go change together! I’ll wait in the hall.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there soon.”

The two of them stood side by side as they watched Minorin’s back. *Hu-humm*, she hummed as she left the classroom.

“...Well, don’t you have something to say?”

“...Th-thank you...!”

So long as you know, Taiga nodded, as though accepting his reaction. “If I’d known Minorin was going, then I wouldn’t have needed to invite you.”

“...I don’t remember being invited, but I do remember you forcing me to raise my hand.”

No matter what they said, the two were in high spirits as they each took their tracksuits and bags and left the classroom. Ryuuji headed to the boys’ locker room, and Taiga and Minorin headed to the girls’ locker room.

But no sooner had they started walking than a brilliantly sweet voice stopped the three of them in their tracks. “Wait!”

Ryuuji turned around. For a moment, he felt like he needed to adjust the glasses he wasn’t wearing. Taiga must have felt the same. She turned, fierce eyes wide open.

“...What?” she growled in a low voice.

“I’m glad I caught you! I decided to go, too! I just transferred, so I want to hurry up and learn about all the school activities!” Kawashima Ami grinned with the smile of an angel. She was unmoved by Taiga’s glare.

“Uhh...did Kitamura tell you to come? Trust me, you’ll be happier if you stay behind—and it’s not exactly something you’d really call a school activity.” In spite of himself, Ryuuji tried to give her real advice, but Ami cutely shook her head, voicing her opposition.

“Yuusaku didn’t tell me anything. I decided to participate myself. And if I don’t exercise, I’ll get fat, right? Minori-chan?”

“Ohh, I see. This is part of your diet, got it.” Minori wasn’t even surprised. She just nodded in acceptance.

Taiga watched from the side of her eye, and wrinkled her forehead, unamused.

“Right, shall we go?” Ami reached out her slim arm as though about to tuck it into Ryuuji’s—or, at least, so he thought. Right before Ami reached him, Taiga intervened.

“Gwah—”

“The girls’ locker room is over here, newbie.”

As though she were a gang leader, the gloomy-eyed Taiga firmly grabbed the nape of Ami’s neck with her right hand. Then she and Minori just pulled Ami along, on the verge of choking, towards the girls’ locker room.

“I-I can walk by myself, Aisaka-san.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, I’ll lead you over, Kawashima-san.”

Unwittingly standing still while watching this devious exchange, Ryuuji suddenly came back to himself. *Isn’t the boys’ locker room in the same direction?* Recomposing himself, he started walking...and clutched at his strangely clamorous heart.

Well, shall we go? Ami’s expression as she tilted her head and looked up at him was strangely sweet, brilliant, and pure... really, it was so cute it could kill him. Regardless of her true nature.

She was a model, so of course she was cute, but there was no shaking the fact that he’d seen something he liked. It made him a little happy. He couldn’t shake that straightforward feeling—only natural, for a boy.

“ALL RIGHT, you pansies! You’ve prepared yourselves, RIGHT? You know perfectly well that I won’t accept a *single one of you* slacking off! We’re going out with our heads held HIGH!”

The drill sergeant was under the thick cover of silvery overcast clouds. Through the megaphone came a rapid, extremely macho voice. It reverberated throughout the grounds. Then, beside the speaker, another figure emerged.

“Today, as always, you’ve given us words that cut right to our hearts. Give it up for our amazing president!”

Yeah, all right! The vice president of the student council, Kitamura, put his hands together in applause.

After school, twenty or so students had gathered in front of the gates. All wore the same uneasy expression. They were looking up at the boss of the cleanup, who stood a level above them... in short, they looked up at their student council president. The happy students trickling through on their way home watched the scene in amusement as they passed by.

“...Wh-what *is* this...?” Seeing it for the first time, Ami was truly shaken.

“...That’s our student council president. None of the opposing candidates got any votes—let’s just say it’s because of their aura of royal authority.”

“O-ohh...then this is definitely *that* person...”

“Come again?”

“Yuusaku told me something a while ago. That there was an amazing upperclassman and they decided to join the student council or something like that...”

“Have you donned your work gloves?! Have you seized your trash bags?! Have you surveyed the terrain we march to clean?!”

Yeah, came their dolorous reply.

“You DUMBASSES!” The student body president stood with a wide stance, head thrown back, white throat exposed. The voice from the megaphone grew louder.



“Do not underestimate these streets! With that attitude, you’ll end up getting thrown off the boat, you IDIOTS! When you answer, you need to give it your all!”

“YEEAHHHHHH!”

“Okay, SHUT YOUR TRAPS! So with that, let’s start this month’s traditional town cleanup. Take care not to hurt yourself. If you’re caught eating something you bought on the job, there will be proper punishment! ...Though really, that just means don’t get caught.”

The president’s lips contorted into a grin. The student body president—the third year Kanou Sumire—flipped her sleek black hair with a cynical smile.

Though she was clothed in a tracksuit, gloves, and long plastic boots, she still cut a handsome figure. With her white skin and tapering eyes, her hair that spilled in a black, silky bundle, and lips that were naturally scarlet without lipstick...on the outside, she was a graceful Yamato Nadeshiko in the flesh—the Japanese ideal of a perfect woman.

But what lay *within* was different.

“All right, then. We’re going, you maggots! Your goal is one full bag per person! Because we have fewer participants than usual, you should be able to easily fulfill your quotas. Well, even though we’re calling them quotas, they’re actually not really that rigid. Anyway, just don’t show anyone outside the school that you’re undisciplined. Show the world your volunteer spirit!”

Sumire was masculine to her core. Her leadership was unrivaled; she was like a female general—no, to be perfectly honest—like a baron or patriarch.

“...She’s, like...super pretty, but...kind of...coarse, right...?” Ami spoke in a low voice, beside Ryuuji. She hadn’t failed to notice the glaring rift between the boss’s appearance and personality. She couldn’t bring herself to look away.

Everyone was like that at first. Ryuuji nodded in understanding. “Yeah, but even though she looks like that, she’s had the top grades in the school since she enrolled. Supposedly, to the student council, she’s like a living legend—she turned around their financial situation in just one term.”

“You sure know a lot about her, Takasu-kun.”

“I’m just repeating what Kitamura told me.”

Kitamura was strangely cheerful as he clapped at each word from the beautiful patriarch on the platform. Maybe he was trying to rouse everyone’s spirits.

“...So she’s the senior he’s proud of, huh...?”

Ryuuji had the impression Kitamura would be a strong leader, but for some reason he was equally faithful in his duties as a grunt.

But how must that have looked to Taiga? She was a little further off, next to Minori, but Taiga looked completely taciturn and unhappy. He couldn’t tell if it was unconscious or on purpose, but she was shuffling restlessly, writing the word “die” on the ground with the tip of her toe.

“Well, you have one hour, starting now! Be absolutely sure you’re not late for the rendezvous time! I won’t release any of you until everyone is here!”

As a follow-up to Sumire’s voice shouting through the megaphone, the student council members each blew a sharp whistle. The twenty gathered students filtered through the school gates into the outside world, sent out in search of trash.

There happened to be one person blended in with the group who was seeking to cultivate a friendship with the vice president.

“The cleanup’s scope is pretty broad... oh, I just got something right off the bat.” As he left the school gate, Ryuuji found an old magazine by the school wall and bent down to grab it with his gloved hand.

“NO!”

He was grabbed by the elastic of his tracksuit and pulled back. Whoever did it kept on pulling him, right at the waistband. He turned around at that mild attack, tracksuit riding up, and found Minori behind him with a stern expression. She waved her index finger back and forth as though to scold him, clicking her tongue.

“Nuh-uh, Takasu-kun. Anywhere around the school is the third years’ turf. We

underclassmen have to go out of the way on expeditions, that's tradition."

"I-It is?"

"Yeah! Here, look!"

Minori pointed to a subdued girl who seemed to be a third year. "This is why newbies mean trouble," the girl muttered, as she chucked the magazine into her bag. It seemed like she was tired from studying from her exams. *Haaah...* She breathed out a protracted sigh and braced her back like an aching grandmother.

"I see..."

"Now, let us wee second years walk a bit more." Minori smiled.

Aaah, he felt like it was the first time in a while he had seen her real smile. Minori's smile was like the sun. It was so bright, so radiant, so *honest* that Ryuuji couldn't help but stare at it, enchanted. It was as though he were getting a healthy sunburn on the dimples on his cheeks, on his nose, and on his head. It was splendid. Just then, Ryuuji thought, *her brightness is drawing me in*.

And the reason he thought that was because of what was happening behind Minori's dazzling back.

"Oh, this trash looks exactly like you, Kawashima-san. It seems you've added another trick to your repertoire of impressions."

"Oh stop, Aisaka-san, your jokes are too harsh! That's just so funny! Oh, Aisaka-san, don't you think this piece of trash looks exactly like *you*? Especially because of how unfortunately *small* it is."

Two dusky poison ivy blooms enjoyed themselves as they competed to exchange sarcastic barbs. Just watching them was exhausting.

"...Taiga, stop. We're going, okay?"

He tapped Taiga's butt with his empty trash bag. Not the best way to get them separated, but something was better than nothing.

"Don't touch my butt! ...Ugh...so irritating...! Tsk." Taiga bared a high-strung fang at Ryuuji and simply walked forward at a brisk pace. She was actually probably worried about Kitamura and the student body president. Ami, being

Ami, also turned away from Taiga and crossed her arms.

Minori seemed to have sensed something as she watched the two of them carrying on. She lowered her voice and whispered to Ryuuji. “Hey, listen. I was... kind of thinking about this at lunch, too, but do you feel like there’s some kind of bad blood between Taiga and Kawashima-san? Or is it just me?”

Why now? he thought, but he couldn’t leave Minori’s question unanswered. “Yeah, it seems like they don’t see eye to eye on a lot of things. They just don’t seem to get along.”

“I see! ...So that’s how it is. Gotcha.”

Before long, the two of them started slowly walking side by side—Ryuuji was so nervous he was shaking. *Right now, I’m walking with Minori. We’re slowly passing under the fresh leaves—strolling down a grove just like on a date. If you ignore the mob of tracksuits in front of and behind us, it’s exactly like a scene from a date. I never thought the day when this would be a reality would come...*

“So, about Taiga and Kawashima-san... Somehow, it seems like Kawashima-san is completely different from the girl I initially thought she was. I don’t mean that in a bad way, exactly. I want Taiga to get along with everyone, but that girl seems difficult in some ways, too... the two of them paired together just might not work. Things get kind of complicated between us girls.” Minori nodded, expression slightly troubled.

Ryuuji also nodded back in the same way. Somehow, he had a hunch that some strange solidarity had been born between him and Minori. If his hunch were real, it would be his first direct “relationship” to her without Taiga or Kitamura acting as intermediaries.

If that was the case, he needed to nurture it into something bigger—Ryuuji suddenly sharpened his eyes, and in a rare move for him, went a bit on the offensive. “I-I don’t worry about Taiga too much, since because you’re here, K-Kushieda.” His voice splintered a little, but there, he at least spoke normally.

Minori laughed and looked up at Ryuuji. “That’s what I should be saying. I think that as long as you’re here, Takasu-kun, Taiga will be okay.”

As usual, he’d been misunderstood, although...that meant that on the list of

people Minori valued, Ryuuji was pretty high up. You might even say he was favored. They smiled at each other, and their eyes locked. Again, another step. He took just one more weighted step. This time he would say it—if he was a man, he had to say it. His bloodshot eyes seethed with naked emotion, and he cleared his tightened throat.

Taiga isn't the only one I want to be close to—I'd like to be closer to you, too, Minori... That's what he would say. This was it. He softly licked his dry lips and casually put his nervously shaking fists in his pockets. The timing was natural, it wouldn't seem weird, and if worse came to worst, he could play it off as though it were a joke. He could only do it now, only now—

“Ta—”

“Ryuuji!”

BAM! He was forcefully thrown back.

“Ryuuji, it's terrible! What should I do?!”

“...”

His voice wouldn't come out. He regained his footing just as he was on the verge of falling over. Though Taiga was still looking up at him, Ryuuji couldn't say a word.

“Come here, quick! Over here!”

And just like that he was pulled into the shadow of an alleyway.

“Kitamura-kun has been beside that president this whole time! This whooole time! He won't leave her! He's laughing it up like he's having the time of his life and isn't noticing me at all! I worked up my courage and tried telling him, I came with Ryuuji, but when I did that do you know what he said?! ‘Oh, I had no idea. I didn't notice, thank you! That helps!’—and that was it. That was all he said! Is that what you say to the girl you once confessed to?! Right?! What do you think?!” she went on a tirade, saying it all in a single breath. Taiga pressed Ryuuji even more for an answer, “Do you think it means...he definitely isn't interested?! Wh-what should I do?! What do you think?! I won't get mad so just be honest!”

“I-I don’t think...well, to be honest—”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I wish you would have left me alone... things were going well with Kushieda...”

“...What’s that?” From a looming distance, Taiga’s expression filled with quiet anger. “Even though things are going so badly for me, they were going well for you?! Huh?! This is bold, even for you!”

“I-Is it so bad? Didn’t you say you wouldn’t get mad?!”

“I’ll get as mad as I want! No, I won’t forgive something like that! I told you, didn’t I? Until I get together with Kitamura-kun, I won’t let you be happy! You... heartless brute!”

Taiga the tyrannical stalked off straight out of the alleyway.

“Taiga, what’s wrong? Just when I thought you’d appeared, you vanished again.”

“Minorin!” Taiga fell into the arms of Minori, who was standing around without anything to do. She firmly wrapped her arms around her.

“I don’t want to be here anymore... let’s go away, just the two of us, as far as our legs will take us!”

“Eloping? I can’t say I dislike the idea.” Minori’s smile got full marks for broadmindedness as she embraced Taiga’s small shoulders.

Then, the two of them nestled close and walked off into the distance. They didn’t even turn back to Ryuuji once. They seemed strangely happy.

“D-damn it...” he groaned in frustration as he stood stock-still. Left behind, Ryuuji could only watch as Minori’s back grew more distant. *And I just made progress—*

“Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

At the sudden words directed to him, he spun around like he’d been hit. Ami was standing beside him, bowing slightly. It seemed she had come out after

Taiga, who she detested, had left.

“Aisaka-san bowled you over just now, right? I saw it. Were you okay?”

“Uh...yeah, well...I’m used to it, anyway.”

“Takasu-kun, you poor thing. Aisaka-san and Minori-chan aren’t around anymore, and I don’t know where Yuusaku went either.”

“Oh...right.”

He suddenly noticed the other students, who were also restlessly walking around, taking starry-eyed glances at Ami. Though they watched the celebrated beauty with feverish eyes, ‘that Takasu’ was next to her, so no one seemed able to talk to her. Outside of their class, the name Takasu Ryuuji still was reckoned in the same standing as the Palmtop Tiger. They were both synonymous with terror.

There were still a few girls who had the courage to walk by and wave, saying “Ami-chaan.” When Ami smiled and waved back, they clamored in delight. But, Ami immediately turned her back to them.

“Well, looks like we’re the leftovers, so let’s work together and get on with it! Hey, where do you want to try going?” She looked up at Ryuuji with her dazzling angel’s smile.

“Uhhh... Are you sure you don’t want to go with those girls from just now?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, I don’t know any of them anyway. I’ll go with you. That’s right, how about we go towards the riverbank? That was part of the cleanup area, right?”

“...I don’t mind, but...”

Are you sure you want me to go with you? He didn’t even get the chance to ask, as Ami happily started walking with long strides. Then she turned right around.

“Hey, you’re going to be left behind!” Just like in a scene from a movie, she held out a supple hand to him. Ryuuji couldn’t just clasp it, so he did the only thing he could and walked quickly to overtake Ami. He looked exactly like the trope of a villainous guy acting bashful.

*Wobble, wobble, wobble...*the tip of the quivering stick finally caught the plastic bottle on the water's edge.

"I-I got it...!"

"You can do it!"

Ryuuji pulled the empty bottle in against the current, and finally breathed a sigh. He shook his arm, which was heavy from stretching it as far as he could manage, and then dropped the bottle into the trash bag, touching it as little as possible. One down.

"Aah...I'm about halfway there..."

"I'm about the same. We don't have too far to go, so let's show some energy!"

At the Class A river that ran along the border of the town, Ryuuji and Ami once again carefully started walking along the lower part of the concrete levee, taking care to keep their sneakers dry. Under the greying clouds, whether it was because no one was there to take care of them or because they had been left to grow as they pleased, grassy patches sprouted between the cracks of the concrete.

The grass gave off a slightly sickening smell alongside the odor of the river water, which couldn't be described as clean. Walking in front of Ami, Ryuuji secretly breathed in. The work had ended up even more lame than he had imagined. The amount of trash in the bags they each held were far from becoming one whole trash bag's worth. Even though the quota wasn't strict, this probably still wouldn't be acceptable.

They had been searching on the promenade above the bank just earlier, but they couldn't find any coveted bulky trash, and so ended up coming all the way down to the shoreline. Then...

"Whoa..."

"Ahh!"

Swash, Ryuuji narrowly avoided the downwind splash of a wave and turned to

Ami. Ami also seemed to have been able to avoid the wave, but...

“Ugh... really... this is the absolute worst...”

Ryuuji gulped.

Her low mumble to herself approached irritation, and there were deep, grim wrinkles rippling across her brow. They didn't suit her at all. On top of Ryuuji being worn out, it seemed that Ami was getting tired, too. The omens of her mask's impending failure were there.

The clouds certainly were dark, and the wind was strong. There wasn't any work more boring than this. It was getting unpleasantly cold, but they were far from finishing. They also hadn't collected enough trash. In these circumstances, anyone other than Ami would normally have been in a bad mood, too. On top of that, there was the incredibly delicate air between the two of them. They couldn't keep up a conversation; it was awkward, and Ryuuji, being shy, couldn't even tell a good joke. He already had his hands full trying to keep his composure so she wouldn't think he was gross.

“A-are you okay?”

“Huh? Yeah! I'm completely fine! This is fun, it's like exploring, right?! I really like stuff like this!” She had stuck on that angel smile without any problems, but the rift was still scary. Ryuuji felt he would have been a lot more comfortable if she had just kept being in a bad mood.

“Hey...you don't have to push yourself so hard. You can rest if you're tired. Even if we can't fill the quota, it's not like they're going to kill us. And this is pretty hard for a girl, right?” That was Ryuuji giving it his all trying to check her mood, but it only made her double down on the act.

“Oh no, I'm completely fine, I'm telling you!” While making a big deal of waving her hand in front of her face, she looked up at him with her Chihuahua eyes, which were radiating sparkles. She inclined her head while spinning especially sweet words for him.

“I was thinking about this since way earlier, you know! That I wanted a chance to have a nice relaxed chat with you, Ryuuji. So...awah!”

It happened then.

A strong gust of mischievous wind had disturbed the water's surface, creating a larger wave than before. Ryuuji quickly ran away to the slope and escaped the trouble, but Ami, down at water level, was too slow.

"...No...way..."

This was unfortunate.

"Are you okay?! I-I ran away by myself, but that was... what have I..."

"..."

Even someone as versatile as Ami didn't seem to have the power to recompose herself right now. She looked long and hard at her sopping wet sneakers and at the hem of her tracksuit. She remained speechless and expressionless as she stood.

"K-Kawashima..."

But finally, he saw the edges of Ami's lips lifting. Slowly, mechanically. Like a machine. Though she raised a grim, shaking look at him, he could see that she was trying her best to soften it.

"Ohh..."

She had a resolve that couldn't be dissolved. Slowly but surely, Ami tried to regain her angelic mask, desperately, with great pain. Then, when she had recomposed seventy percent of it...

"Eep—"

...Her pretty features once again froze over. On top of Ami's wet feet—on top of her sneaker laces—some sort of blackish, moist, and weird object wriggled and writhed. For about three full seconds, she just stared at it.

"Eeee..."

And then she shrieked.

"NOOOOOOOOOO AAAHHHHHHHHHHH GET IT OFF GET IT OFF GET IT OFFFF!" Outright screaming, Ami tumbled over. She flailed her feet around.

"S-stop moving! Stop moving! Don't kick my face, they'll fall down! You'll crush them!"

On her feet were two, no, three tadpoles with composed faces. As Ami screamed on the brink of madness, nearly unconscious, Ryuuji somehow got her shoes off.

“Salvaged!”

He was able to return the tiny tadpoles to the stream.

“...Wh...wha...wha.”

But.

Collapsed on her back, Ami’s face was in rigor mortis. She was out of breath. Frozen over. Her hair was in terrible disarray, her legs were carelessly spread out, her tracksuit was sopping wet up to her shins, and it went without saying that her socks were covered in mud. “Kawashima Ami-chan” was in a horrible, unbecoming condition.

Ryuuji hesitantly approached.

“I-I’ll...put your shoes here. Okay. They’re wet, but there aren’t any tadpoles on them anymore, okay?”

He quietly put the sneakers together by her feet. Ami’s big eyes swerved to look down at those shoes.

“Ah, ah, ah...”

Ami-chan, he heard her say in a very low mumble.

It only took another second after he heard that.

“AMI-CHAN-DOESN’T-WANT-TO-DO-THIS-ANY-MOOOOOOOOOOOOORE!”

Her white hands grabbed her shoes, and she chucked them straight into the riverbank.

“...Wha...uwaahh...!”

Without thinking, Ryuuji covered his mouth with his hands. He couldn’t say anything more. The mask was off.

Ami huffed with her shoulders like a beast. Words poured out of her, things like “I can’t stand it anymore,” and, “I really can’t do this anymore,” and, “Ami-chan is going home, I’m going home *right now!*” and on it went. Until...

“AAH?!”

She turned and locked eyes with Ryuuji. She finally seemed to remember his existence. For several seconds, the two of them stared at each other without words.

“...Eheh!” Ami put her fists up to her mouth, and put on her pure and deadly smile. “Just kidding! That’s a joke, a joke! C’mon, Takasu-kun, don’t make such a scary face!”

You’re the one who’s scary... Of course, he couldn’t actually say that.

Ami smiled as she turned back to him several times and laughed, *Eheheh*. Still in her socks, she bravely went up the bank.

“Here I go, here I go... ahh! I found them! What a relief!”

In each hand, she was holding the shoes she herself had just thrown, all smiles. With a forced sweetness in her voice, she dramatically turned around. She put her shoes on then and there.

“Takasu-kun, do you want to race to the bank?”

“...Uhh...”

“The one who loses has to give the one who wins all their trash! Then the winner has their quota filled! I’m gonna staaart—aaand GO!”

As Ryuuji watched Ami’s back as she ran up the bank, he thought, *The winner gets the trash, but...you just left behind the trash bags.*

He reluctantly took the two people’s worth of trash bags in his hands and quickly went up the bank. He couldn’t keep up with her, but in this case, it was his only option.

In the grass, Ami disappeared from his field of view. Right about now, she was probably trying to desperately remake her broken mask where no one could see. He thought about going a little more slowly.

“You’re slooow!”

Then he saw her hop out from behind the grass onto the top of the bank with her features completely composed, cute as can be.

“Takasu-kun, you lost! But, I’ll keep helping you pick up trash, so don’t worry, you’ll be fine!” she said in a bright voice as she looked down at him. It seemed like she had fully regained her usual smile.

“...You don’t have to keep doing that.”

“Huh? Doing what?”

Contrary to her words, it was impossible to hide the bewilderment in her wavering gaze—it was because Ami’s eyes were too large. And then, just like Ryuuji, she was too tired to remake herself in the way she intended.

“What’s the *point* of it all? All this suffering and effort just to look a little better in front of me? It’s not like I’m going to tell anyone or anything. So just go rest somewhere over there or head back early.”

At those unintentionally blunt words, Ami’s eyes became round with puzzlement. “...What are you talking about? I don’t understand what you mean.”

It seemed she was intent on seeing her charade through to the end. Even though the mask had broken long ago, it didn’t seem to be ordinary brashness. But, Ryuuji’s own brashness was a force to be reckoned with, too. If anything, it was because he was taking care of the Palmtop Tiger day in and day out.

“...If you really don’t get it, that’s fine, too. You can do what you want. But I understand it even less than you do. Why are you forcing yourself to participate in this boring cleanup? What’s the *point* of it—to doing this? Is there one?”

He didn’t actually intend to accuse her of anything, but he couldn’t just not ask. He couldn’t help but think the work involved in the cleanup wasn’t suited to someone who wanted to keep up an act. Ami didn’t have to go this far. She already had a good reputation spreading among the class.

But Ami muttered, “You don’t understand the point?” Her smile suddenly disappeared. “...You don’t understand. Huh...”

Ryuuji stopped walking for a moment at that clear gaze. He found himself unintentionally straining his eyes to better see what kind of expression she had on, but the wind blew and scattered Ami’s hair, shrouding her face.

“It seems like you aren’t as easy as I anticipated, Takasu-kun. This sort of thing doesn’t work on you...”

I just wanted to play around with that shrimp, but this messed me up—he thought he heard derision in her hoarse voice.

“Huh? What were you playing at...?”

But, when he questioned her...

“Hm? Whaaat? That’s how you heard it? That’s weird, you must have misheard.” She tucked her hair behind her ear, and like an angel, smiled her usual calm smile as she looked at Ryuuji. “I told you earlier, but the reason why I’m here is that I wanted to have a nice, relaxed conversation with you, Takasu-kun. Is that such a mysterious reason?”

Those sweet words, that beautiful smile... this was undoubtedly the superficial Ami he was so used to. No matter what he said, he couldn’t seem to reach her. He just got the usual Ami, who looked down on other people.

Ryuuji breathed in, deciding against asking any more questions. No matter what he said, it wouldn’t reach this Ami anyway. If she wanted to do this, she could. It no longer had anything to do with him.

Then, suddenly Ami looked up at the sky. “...Was that rain...?”

Cold, heavy drops also fell on Ryuuji’s cheeks.

“...This is ridiculous, isn’t it...?”

They were beside the promenade, on a bench under a square gazebo. Ami was holding her slender legs as she sat, muttering as though in a daze.

She had recovered her mask but hadn’t been able to keep it on for more than ten minutes—she didn’t seem in any state to go on picking up trash.

Just as Ami had said, the scene beyond the cover of the simply built gazebo, its roof supported merely by posts, was ridiculous. They had suddenly been assailed by torrential rain.

Massive clouds covered the sky, and even though it was around four, a strange gloom engulfed the area. The downpour of slanting raindrops violently gouged the soft earth like bullets. It had only been a few minutes since it

started, but here and there puddles were quickly forming, flowing like small streams. The river was right below the embankment, but it looked blurry and hazy.

The strong wind made the roof creak with its roar.

“...What if the roof just blows away...?”

“It won’t.” He tried to laugh it off, but it seemed Ami was actually afraid.

“I wonder if we’ll actually be okay...”

“With the way it’s raining now, it’ll probably stop in a few minutes.”

Ryuuji leaned on a post as he spoke, but Ami’s face remained gloomy at his words. Her wet hair was plastered to her white cheeks. Now it didn’t matter whether this was her mask or true self. The delicate awkwardness had been blown away in the face of the torrential rain, along with everything else. Ami simply shivered slightly from the cold, anxiously looking up at the moving sky. The tracksuit covering her thin shoulders was also thoroughly drenched.

“...Achoo!”

It was a small sneeze, like a baby mouse’s. It was completely different from Taiga’s weird, loud sneezes. It made him want to take off what he was wearing and put it on her shoulders. But, Ryuuji’s tracksuit was just as wet as hers.

“Aren’t you cold? ...I have a trash bag I’m not using, so do you want to wear that? I can open a hole for your head.”

“Huh?! Like hell I’d do that!”

He was rejected in a flash. If Ami had had her mask on right now, she would definitely have smiled and accepted it.

“...Right. You wouldn’t want a trash bag poncho.”

“I don’t, I’d never. I wouldn’t do anything like that! Seriously... unbelievable.” With a bratty snort, Ami turned away childishly.



If this were the normal Ami, she definitely wouldn't have shown how sullen she was. It seemed that the mask, once cracked open, could easily be shattered by some further incident. By (for example) a terrible, sudden burst of freezing torrential rain.

"...This is definitely the tadpoles' curse." He tried to break up the strained silence with something silly. Ami looked up at Ryuuji, unamused.

"...Why do I have to be cursed?"

"It's payback for putting their lives in danger, right?"

"But you saved them, didn't you, Takasu-kun?"

"...Well, in truth, I just pretended that I saved them, but I actually threw them over there into the grass..."

"Huh?!"

Ami suddenly sat up straight, speechless. Her mouth hung half open and her wide-open eyes seemed ready to overflow.

"...Hey, I'm obviously lying. Do I look like someone who could do something like that?"

"Wh...what! Well! I was afraid you were serious for a second—I'm here to tell you, Takasu-kun, that you look *exactly* like someone who could do something like that!"

How rude.

"Hey, what's that all about? Sorry, but I'm actually a pretty nice guy. Though I'm saying that about myself, which is kind of awkward... but I actually like animals a lot and have an inko I hatched from an egg and take very good care of."

"An inko as in a parakeet? ...Is that the ugly perverted parakeet that Aisaka Taiga was talking about?"

"I can't believe Taiga said that! She's actually a really charming and good parakeet."

"Are there good and bad parakeets? What's its name?"

“Inko-chan.”

“...”

Ami was silent for a moment.

“Ahahaha! What is that?!”

Suddenly, she laughed out loud. Not knowing what she meant, Ryuuji’s eyes sharpened with confusion as she pointed at him.

“Normal people wouldn’t name it something like that! That’s not a real name, that’s just what it is! You’re weird, weird, weird, totally weiiird!”

“...Am I?”

“You bet you are!”

Ami swept up her wet and dripping hair, displaying the entirety of her round forehead. Patting both hands together, she kept right on laughing. She stamped her legs—she just couldn’t help herself. “‘Inko-chan!’ What is *that*?! Takasukun, you’re completely different inside from what you look like on the outside. Though you’re nowhere near as bad as that president!” She turned her eyes towards Ryuuji, brimming with tears from laughing too hard.

But then...

“Oh, no.”

Ami’s laughter ended just as quickly as it had started. It was as though someone had petrified her with a spell. Turned to stone, Ami looked past Ryuuji at something far behind him. Her expression looked more like a statue with every passing moment.

“What is it? Come on, hey! Kawashima!”

Without replying to Ryuuji, Ami ran out of the gazebo into the torrential rain. Ryuuji couldn’t keep pace with someone this inconsistent. Ami didn’t listen to him asking her to stop. She stooped and half-ran into the overgrown grass, bending over to hide herself. She took the cold rain head-on, but the distance between them grew and grew as she charged onward regardless. He didn’t understand what was going on, but he couldn’t just leave her alone, either.

“Wait!”

Ryuuji also jumped into the slanting rain. Then, once he caught up with her, he forcefully grasped Ami from behind. Somehow he managed to push her into a broken-down bike rack a ways out from the gazebo.

The bike rack at least had an iron roof, but the difference between it and the gazebo was like heaven and earth. They were still exposed to the wind and they didn't have anywhere to sit. Rusted bikes lay piled in a messy heap right next to them.

“What's going on with you?! Why'd you go out into this rain on purpose...?”

“Shh!”

“...!”

A cold hand reached out to the nape of Ryuuji's neck. Between the coldness of her touch and Ami's close scent, Ryuuji couldn't speak, or breathe.

She clung to him, leaning her weight on him. Then, she roughly pushed him down into a crouch.

“Hey...wait...why...?”

“...Shh, because!”

Her body felt strangely cushiony and soft against him, but she was so slender, almost fleeting. Where Ami's skin touched his, it felt so smooth he thought he might melt into it.

But he couldn't do that. As his face turned a bright blood red, Ryuuji grabbed a pole out of earnest and absolute desperation. He pulled himself away to get free of Ami's leaning body weight. In the sweet smell of rain, like a drowning man, Ryuuji sought to lose himself in the cold void and let his breath escape him.

But he heard the faint whisper of a hoarse voice.

“...Let's hide like this...for a little...”

Then, Ami crouched and rounded herself up into a small ball. She completely settled herself into Ryuuji's chest, as though using his body as a shield. He was

so close that he could see her pearly gray eyes and her long eyelashes, which were wet and shimmering from the clear rain that clung to them.

“Ah, ah, ah... wai-wai...th-this is...” At his wit’s end, with a face so red that it looked like it would spray blood at a pinprick, Ryuuji raised his voice in embarrassment. If there was anyone who could act normally at such a sudden, transcendental embrace—and with an incredibly pretty girl, no less—he wanted to know who they were.

“...Over there...” she whispered in a small voice, pointing carefully to show him. He was still in a dreamy state as he looked in that direction, but the change came instantaneously. Ryuuji’s boiling blood dropped to below freezing in an instant, and he sunk down on his feet in a chill.

“...Th-that guy...”

Back at their original gazebo, the guy who’d just run in to escape the rain was unpleasantly familiar.

The man folded up his umbrella and looked around. It was that guy who looked like a college student at first glance, who, if he weren’t carrying a digital camera in this torrent, wouldn’t have been so strangely conspicuous.

Instinctively, Ryuuji had goosebumps. He exchanged his spot for Ami’s and managed to completely hide her.

“It’s the weirdo from yesterday...right? Why would he be in a place like this? It’s too much to be a coincidence...”

“...Do you really think there’s any chance it could be?”

“...”

He couldn’t answer Ami’s question. But no—it definitely couldn’t be a coincidence.

“He was waiting while I was at school...and followed us here...!”

A gross sensation slithered through Ryuuji. He shuddered unconsciously—and that wasn’t just because of the cold. “How would he know the school you go to? You made it sound like he was a weird fan you happened to run into yesterday.”

“...Right, and he *is*, but...” Ami’s faltering voice was mixed with hesitation. He understood. Several times, she opened her mouth, but she kept silent. She held her breath, sheltered within Ryuuji’s arm. Just like that, her body froze up.

“Say it. Now that it’s come to this, you can’t keep it a secret.”

When he quickly jolted her cold shoulders, her back faintly shook. Then, slowly, in a quiet voice, she finally spoke the words.

“Well...there’s only one way to put it. That guy...is a *stalker*.”

At the reverberation of those words, Ryuuji recalled the furious shout Ami had given earlier in her treacherous fight with Taiga—*you stalker!* He thought that might pretty much have been the one and only time Ami’s emotions were laid bare.

“Yesterday, how do I put this... I was too embarrassed to say it. I don’t want it to be a big deal...and that guy is an infamous nuisance in the industry. Somehow, he researches you and appears around your house or your parents’ house or your school with camera in hand. He’s been prowling around after other magazine models besides me and causing trouble.”

“...For real...?”

At Ryuuji’s grumble, Ami nodded, and then continued on. “The reason I moved here was because of that guy. My mom is an entertainer, right? My mom’s office told me there were problems with a weird guy prowling around our neighborhood...so I ended up coming here alone and living with my relatives. My dad is also busy with work, so he couldn’t leave his office at the city center. But...I didn’t think that this guy would keep looking for me even after the move...”

“So that’s how it is...”

“Yeah. I don’t think I could have helped having to move, but...I’m scared. I’m separated from my parents, and until this cools down, I took a break from modeling work, and a break from the agency. So no one is here to protect me... before, my manager would pick me up with a car but...ugh, I can’t believe it...I can’t believe he would follow me all the way here...!”

That would be scary.

It was scary enough to make even *him* cold, and he was a guy. For Ami, who was the target, it was probably so terrifying that he couldn't even imagine.

He unconsciously held her more firmly with his arm.

"...Takasu-kun..."

"Until that guy gives up and goes, let's keep hiding."

He was a coward who couldn't bring himself to say *I'll beat that guy up*, but even Ryuuji could at least hide with her. They both remained there, trying to lower the sound of their breathing, huddled up together, waiting for the time to pass.

But while the rain might have made some people give up, this guy was still sitting on the bench. He started leisurely wiping his wet camera.

And during that time, the rain mercilessly changed directions. It blew right into them. Ryuuji's tracksuit got wet and started to grow heavy. When he was wondering just how long they'd need to stay like this, he heard a voice.

"Heeey! Takasu-kuun! Kawashima-saaan! That's weird, they're not anywhere. But in this rain... what's goin' on with it? Taiga, aren't you cold?"

"I'm fine. What about you, Minorin?"

"I'm totes fine! But I really do wonder where they got off to. There was someone who saw them heading to the riverbank, too..."

"It's raining pretty hard, so I wonder if they went back halfway. What if they already went back?"

"Wouldn't we have seen 'em if they were on their way back?"

In the increasing wind and rain, the voices they heard were no doubt Minori and Taiga. He felt uncertain whether he could depend on those two. He wasn't sure if he could trust that unpredictable pair—he wasn't sure whether they'd been saved or if the situation had just gotten worse. But still, without thinking Ryuuji turned...

"Hey, those voices are definitely Taiga's and Kushi... bwuh!"

He sputtered. Even though it was a time like this...

It was just such a terrible sight. Minori had opened a hole in a trash bag and was wearing exactly the article of clothing they'd talked about before—a merry see-through poncho.

And Taiga was using an extremely small, see-through takeout box like an umbrella over her head.

“Hey, Minorin, those takoyaki from earlier weren't that hot. I know it's a bit late, but I'm ticked off. Let's go give them a piece of our mind.”

It was a takoyaki box...but it was somehow still keeping her completely safe from the rain. Was it fine if she got aonori and katsuoboshi stuck to her head? She really was actually stupid... no, if he laughed, his abdominal muscles would... but then the tension diffused.

Peering up at Ryuuji, who was desperately trying to suppress a laugh, Ami rebuked him with pinched lips. “Takasu-kun, you're kind of...shaking.”

“Sorry...I kind of got caught up...it's just that...a takoyaki box as an umbrella is... Bwahaha!”

Hadn't he seen a goblin outfitted like that before? A Mizuki drawing clearly formed in his mind.

But it seemed Ryuuji wasn't the only one who was inspired by the odd sight. The stalker, still in the gazebo, suddenly turned around.

“A cute, pint-sized goblin discovery!”

He brought up his camera, rude as you please. But there was no way that the queen of the beasts, the Palmtop Tiger, wouldn't notice that move.

“...A goblin... me?”

In an instant, Taiga's face twisted, baring fangs that thirsted for his blood. She turned her brutal gaze directly at the place where the voice had come from—the gazebo.

“You over there! I don't know what you're trying to do, but you're pretty creepy! I didn't just hear a suspicious looking person like you calling me a *goblin*, did I?!”

She licked her lips with a red tongue—when her bloodlust was up, it didn't

matter if she was dealing with someone she had never seen before, or even some kind of pervert. She would go off on them without hesitation.

She rolled up the takoyaki container she was using as an umbrella in her hands, and her simple sword was done. She gripped it firmly in both hands, and brought her elbows into a sturdy stance.

“Rain like this will wash away all the evidence,” she muttered, and went right into a fierce dash.

“Huh? Wha, whoa!”

Still silent, sturdily holding her sword-carton, her face was that of an ogress. She tore ahead at an unnatural speed. There was no way he wouldn’t be terrified of a mysterious goblin dashing full force towards him.

“Wh-what is this?!”

Flustered, the man grabbed his backpack. He barely got his umbrella open before he turned his back to Taiga and started running.

Taiga just kept on pursuing. “I don’t care who you are or where you came from—whoa!”

Sploop. Her foot was helplessly stuck in the mud.

All this happened right in front of the dilapidated rack Ryuuji and Ami were hiding by. Right before she was about to fall face first into the mud...

“...Y-you...”

...Ryuuji jumped out into the middle of the rain. With miraculous timing, he grabbed Taiga by the nape of her neck. He narrowly caught her in midair, posed like an ensnared beast. “You klutz!”

Stuck in the same position, Taiga checked her feet. “...I-I thought I was gonna fall for sure! I stopped breathing!”

She desperately clung to Ryuuji’s arm, wet hair drooping to her waist. She had a look on her face like a cat that had been hit by a car. She breathed in a delicate, long breath.

“Don’t go around chasing someone you don’t know! Throw that thing away!”

Toss it!” Ryuuji slapped the carton sword (or goblin umbrella) from her hands. The top of her head seemed to smell a little like katsuboshi. As he was intently and absentmindedly staring at the crown of her head, Minori caught up to them.

“Taiga, what are you doing?! And wait, who the heck was that guy?! And wait, Takasu-kun, where were you?!”

Her face seemed to have a giant question mark in the middle of it as she wiped the mud off Taiga’s face.

At that point, Ami, equally soaked, came on out. She stopped in front of Minori, who turned in surprise.

“...And wait, where were *you*, Kawashima-san?!” She picked rotten scraps of grass off Ami’s shoulders.

“...”

A single droplet rolled down and fell from Ami’s rain-soaked face.

“A stalker?!” While Kitamura shouted, he pushed up his drooping glasses. “You didn’t tell me about anything like that at all! You said you were tired of modeling, and didn’t like your school, and that your parents didn’t come home much!”

“...It was hard for me to tell you. Because if I told *you*, Yuusaku, you’d just worry about me.”

As he looked into the face of his childhood friend, who had grown entirely too beautiful, Kitamura had a rare moment of hesitation.

As a thank you for participating in the cleanup, and to make it up to them for getting soaked in the storm, Kitamura had invited them to a late-night fast food place. Although the rain had tapered off to a light sprinkle, there still weren’t many other customers on account of the bad weather.

After Ami finished telling Kitamura about her incredibly bleak situation, for some reason, she turned her ivory face down in embarrassment. Ryuuji, as a witness, refrained from making a statement as he sat beside her. Minori

furrowed her brow while looking at Ami in worry.

“...Oh...”

Taiga dribbled ketchup from the potato chip she was holding—probably succumbing to the nervousness that came with Kitamura being nearby. Ryuuji, still silent, pulled out the wet tissues he carried around for Taiga’s messes, and quickly wiped her skirt.

In a rare moment for the group surrounding the table, they were all silent.

“Anyway, for now...”

The one who cut the fuse was Kitamura.

“We need to go to the police.”

“I already talked to them,” said Ami. “There seem to be other girls with the agency who pressed charges against him, but that guy’s really sly. He doesn’t leave any evidence of his identity. And it’s not like the police will start a real investigation over something this minor...”

“Then I’ll catch him and bring him to the police myself. He’s been hanging around you, right? I’ll talk to the other members and have them help—”

“Don’t, it’s too dangerous. And something like that...it’d become too big of a deal. It would cause trouble. You understand, right? Something like this is too juicy a scandal. I could end up becoming a public ‘victim,’ which would be entirely too much for me to endure. And if by any chance you or anyone else got hurt, I couldn’t handle the responsibility. And anyway, my mom... I don’t think my mom’s agency would forgive me.”

After being told that, even the righteous one among them grew silent. Kitamura groaned in a low voice as he crossed his arms. “But if this keeps up...”

“Right! That’s it!”

Bringing up her pointer finger, Minori suddenly raised her voice. She opened her eyes wide and told them, “This is our only option.”

“The reason why they can’t catch that guy is because they don’t know his identity, right? Then, let’s stalk the stalker! While he’s stalker-stalking Kawashima-san, we’ll take pictures or video as evidence to bring him down.

We'll take that to the police, and have them figure out who he is, and then have them catch him. That should be good, right?"

"Kushieda...! That's it! Amazing! As expected of the girls' softball club president! No, right now, I feel like I could even hand over the boys' club to you!"

"I know, right?! Give me the boys! I'll rearrange their bodies a little and make it an all-girls division!"

"Ahaha, you really are a maniac!"

Kitamura and Minori were getting all riled up. They slapped their hands together playfully, but Ryuuji couldn't help but cut in...even if he wasn't sure whether he wanted to get involved "But wait a sec. Who would do it?"

"Why not me?" Minori said without any pretension, taking Ryuuji captive with her dazzling smile. "A friend of the belly is a friend of the heart! I have enough room in both to help out with this."

Yay! She flashed a victory sign. Minori was truly kind. A goddess, dropped to the earth amongst unworthy mortals. Ryuuji was moved by how expansive her generosity could be. He held his hand to his mouth and his eyes glinted madly.

Though he wasn't angry—he was just teary eyed.

"I-I'll do my best to help, too."

He didn't have confidence in his strength, but to have his beloved Minori say something like that, and then for him to not say anything—he couldn't do something so crude. His pride as a man wouldn't allow it. Then, he took a glance at Taiga, whose presence seemed awfully subdued.

The Baron Ashura face was there again.

Ryuuji could more or less imagine why. The right half of her face was jealous of Ami because of Kitamura's worry for her. The left side was excited over the anticipation of potentially doing something with Kitamura. Her whole body was afflicted by subtle worry for Minori, who was saying she would help, and probably... just very, very slightly, there was just a hint of worry for Ami.

...At least, he wanted to think there was. "Hey, Taiga." Really, if he didn't send

her a lifeline, she really would just turn to stone. “You’re definitely helping, too, right? You have a grudge against that guy, too. See, he said that thing to you right? He said...”

“...Something terrible. He called me a goblin.”

He couldn’t give away that he’d been thinking of exactly those words. Ryuuji nodded knowingly at her. “Then, you’ve gotta bring him down.”

For a moment she held her tongue and turned her gaze to Ryuuji. It looked as though her anger at the incident and even her interest in it had already evaporated. “...Right. ...That makes sense. Yeah, let’s do it. Ami, I may not be able to stand you, but just this once, I’ll fight with you.”

Taiga turned to Ami, and nodded deeply at her once.

“Just now, our hearts became one!”

Beside Kitamura, who was so riled up from the tension he was about to make a speech, Ami was afflicted with worry and her face was still downcast as she bit her lip, unable to make a sound. Ryuuji noticed.

“Are you okay?” he asked her automatically. Ami raised her face as though she’d suffered a physical blow. Then she quickly conjured up a smile.

“...Uh, yeah! If everyone’s going to help me, I’m back to 100%! Thank you—you’re all so dependable!”

Those strangely light words echoed emptily through the deserted restaurant.

Chapter 6

“The feared, the strong-armed, the captain, Kushieda Minori!”

“Yo! My Kanto-regulated ‘Bullet Back Home’ pitch ain’t just for show!”

“The chef with the evil eye, Takasu Ryuuji!”

“Y-yo...this’ll be over by five, right? There’s a limited time sale on chicken today.”

“The one with the most powerful name, the one and only, Aisaka Taiga!”

“...”

“And then me, Kitamura Yuusaku! Everyone’s on board, right?”

Pointing at each of them as they sat in a row to confirm, Kitamura balled his fingers tightly into a fist. It seemed that even the ever-busy Kitamura had taken time off from his club of his own volition. He’d obtained a special exemption from his student council activities in order to come along.

No other students lingered in the four o’clock classroom. The pale sunlight only illuminated the three henchmen sitting around Kitamura and Ami, who stood a bit further away.

Well then, Kitamura’s well-projecting voice rose. His presidential nature was on full display. “We’ll start our maneuver without delay, just as we planned yesterday. Here are the assignments. Kushieda, Aisaka, and I will take the picture of the stalker. We’ll use this digital camera, and also everyone’s cellphones. Takasu, please go with Ami and be prepared for the worst case.”

Ryuuji raised his hand, and after getting Kitamura’s approval, chimed in. “... Wouldn’t it be better for you and me to take the picture of the stalker and for the other two girls to be with Kawashima?”

At any rate, Taiga had thought that that assignment might have been too dangerous for Minori. But Kitamura discarded Ryuuji’s words. “No, if something were to happen and we had to leave taking the picture to them, it would be bad if the girls were left by themselves. There’s a chance that if he finds out we’re doing this, he might be provoked into something. In that one in a million

chance, you'll protect Ami—with your scary face.”

“...Well, I sort of understand why you're asking me to...but I'm not confident I can really convince anyone I'm ready to fight.” Looking at the fist that he'd never swung at someone in anger, not even once since birth, Ryuuji shamefully lowered his voice. But then Ami walked over to his side and wrapped her hands around his arm.

“It's fine! I know you're reliable, Takasu-kun! I believe you'd definitely protect me!”

“Uh...ah...huh?!” At her sudden approach, Ryuuji couldn't get out any words. He didn't even know how to get her to let go. While he moved awkwardly and restlessly in an attempt to quietly take back his grasped arm, his cheeks became shamefully hot. Compared to this, even Taiga's cold, piercing gaze was comfortable.

“There. Then let's get moving. We don't know where he's been watching for her, so when we leave the shoe racks, Takasu and Ami go first. Take the route we talked about yesterday. Let's communicate at our discretion via cellphone.”

At Kitamura's command, they filtered out of the classroom and walked single file down the hallway.

“...Hey, what's this thing?” Ryuuji noticed something strange in Taiga's collar as she walked in front of him.

“I brought it just in case. Doesn't this thing feel nostalgic?”

She twisted her lips into a grin. A wooden, rod-like object was faintly visible through Taiga's hair. Wondering what it was, Ryuuji pulled it out slightly. “...If you start waving this thing around, you'll make this into a big deal.”

“I know that, that's why it's for just in case.”

She quickly pushed the handle of the wooden sword Ryuuji had seen back into the neck of her jacket. *Ahh, it is nostalgic—that spring night, when she tried killing me with this...* When he looked closely, she had strangely good posture. The reason was undoubtedly because that thing—that thing he had unfortunately seen—was set along her back. It was only the length of her hair that kept it concealed.

“More importantly, Ryuuji.” Suddenly Taiga lowered her voice and looked straight up at him, large eyes intent. She was still hiding the wooden sword behind her back.

“Hm?”

“You really are such a hopeless, perverted dog...that mooning face you made earlier...was slovenly. It’s embarrassing to your owner, frankly.”

“Wh...what are you talking about...?” Even while he asked her, he of course knew what she was talking about.

At Ryuuji’s face, Taiga made an exaggerated sigh. “I guess that means you’ve gotten real close to Kawashima Ami. ...Well, I guess that’s fine? You’re planning on forgetting about Minorin quick since she doesn’t like you, so you can switch over to a pretty girl who’s willing to get all cozy with you. Guess you’re that kind of guy. I’ll remember that.”

“That’s... y-you’re totally misunderstanding something there.”

“I wonder if I am. Well, do as you please. I can’t be bothered to deal with a dog in heat.”

“...Man, where do you get off saying that?”

Hmph. In the end, she gave him a poison-filled smile. Taiga averted her face haughtily and left Ryuuji behind with a trot. Then, just like that, she shook her long, pale, smoky hair and stuck close to Minori, who was walking up ahead.

“Yo, if it isn’t Taiga-chan. You’re lookin’ cute today.”

Taiga purred like a cat. Though it was hard to say if Minori could see the thing or not, Taiga playfully poked Minori’s butt with the point of the wooden sword that just barely fit under the hem of her skirt.

“You’ve got something hard in there.”

“You can’t ever be too careful.”

Ryuuji automatically stared—no, he sighed in exasperation. *You go around calling me a perverted dog, but you’re the one who’s way more perverted.*

And even from Taiga, calling him that was way too terrible an insult. *Just what*

did I do, anyway? But the time when he could have made a comeback had already passed.

“Takasu-kun, what’s wrong?”

“Ah...no, nothing.”

At some point, Ami had caught up to his side. From the shock he got at seeing her smile, he tensed up. They were practically bumping shoulders as they walked side by side, and even his anger hazily dissipated. He started to feel strangely impatient.

At any rate, the girl called Kawashima Ami was unexpectedly way too close... which accounted for the hotness of his cheeks. He broke off staring at her, the corners of his mouth turning slowly downwards.

They walked side by side along the residential street.

“And that’s when I asked them to let me try on the light pink one. But the person at the store, right? They said that the white one would definitely look good on me and she could only see me in white, so she pretty much forced me to try the knitted shirt. And then, I was like, maybe white’s better than I thought, and then I remembered the shirt I bought the other day was also white. Oh, maybe it wasn’t white, but like a pale gray one that I bought...or beige? Maybe it was beige?”

Ami grinned and continued chattering endlessly about her shopping. You could probably call this her ‘so preoccupied by shopping, can’t think about anything difficult, cute and fashionable girl’ face.

“Takasu-kun, are you listening?”

“...Yeah.”

“White or pink, which would you choose?”

“...For me, I think pink’s a little...”

“Not you! I’m talking about *my* clothes!”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

Ahahahaha—hahaha...haha...ha...

After all this time, Ryuuji finally understood Kitamura's true motive. There hadn't been anything wrong with him when he'd said he wanted Taiga to get along with Ami.

"I really love buying clothes." What happened the day before might as well have been a long-forgotten memory. Ami spoke like an endearing child and gave him the smile of an angel. But he felt like the Ami who would fiercely glare at Taiga was much better than this one. The Ami who cursed as she threw her tadpole-tainted shoes into the riverbank was much easier to understand.

He felt something entirely distinct from boredom, or the slight chill he got on seeing Ami's mask—instead, he felt as though he'd now seen something dangerous. This face was a lie, after all.

Her mask was thin ice—there was no doubt that her true face was mired in unease underneath. But why was she hiding that? Putting aside whether she had a good or bad personality (well, it was pretty bad), he couldn't help but wonder why she would go through the trouble of hiding her true nature after she'd already been found out.

"Oh, your phone's going off." Ami indicated Ryuuji's pocket with one seashell-like fingertip. The phone had started buzzing at some point. He quickly flipped it open...

"...Hello?"

"Private Takasu! What's the situation over there?!"

He answered Kitamura's impassioned and enthusiastic voice quite normally. "Nothing's changed on our end. What about over there?"

"We spotted our suspect right away. He's on approach about ten meters off your six. We're keeping our distance and are in pursuit."

"Takasu-kun, it's Yuusaku, right? Let me talk to him, too." Ami reached out and took the phone from Ryuuji. "Hellooo, Yuusaku? Yeah, we're fine here, plus I've got Takasu-kun! But, you know, my feet are kind of getting tired... yeah, yeah... oh really? Then we'll do that."

She hung up the call without another word and flipped the phone closed.

“Yuusaku said to find someplace to go indoors. Somewhere where we can get a drink, with seats by a window,” Ami said, smiling happily. “Are there any places like that around here? Can you take us somewhere?”

“Somewhere where we can get drinks...nearby... can you see the sign over there on the other side of that road?” He felt that going with Ami to get a drink at a café would be tough, but it was on Kitamura’s orders. He pointed at a round sign with a flat green theme just a bit further ahead.

“Oh, it’s a Starbucks! So there are some here, yay! I can finally get a latte again!”

“It looks like a Starbucks, right? But...”

“...Hm? ...Huh? ...What?”

As Ryuuji brought them closer, Ami’s head tilted more and more in suspicion. The sign did look exactly like one from the famous North American coffee chain. It was round, had a green border, and some sort of ambiguous, humanoid illustration. “T-this is...”

But that illustration was the likeness of the old, male shopkeeper.

“It’s the Sudoh Coffee Stand and Bar... we call it the Pseudobucks...”

“...Geh...”

Brrring.

As the incongruous door chime sounded, Ryuuji and Ami entered the Pseudobucks. The interior decoration, at least, approached that of a real Starbucks. There were comfortable looking sofas to sit in, the employees at the self-serve cafe looked to be college aged women, and it wasn’t that crowded, either.

“Wow...Pseudobucks...the atmosphere is pretty nice...” Looking around the place, Ami nodded in great interest. Then an old man stood up from a window seat.

“Oh! Aren’t you Mirano-chan’s kid?” he called out to Ryuuji, familiar. It was Inage-san, a Bishamon Heaven regular who was grieving his divorce from just

that spring.

“Oh, good afternoon.”

“Wellll, what have you been up to? You’ve brought in a good-lookin’ gal today, too...did you break up with that pipsqueak terror of a kid? Yeah, you broke up, didn’t you?! That’s nice, a second marriage... err, I mean, a new girlfriend...”

“No, you’re mistaken. Kawashima, that man’s seat is gonna open up, so sit there. I’ll go buy something and bring it over.”

“Okaaay.”

How cute~, you’re such a pretty girl~, don’t you look almost exactly like that actress Kawashima Anna~, yes~ I get that a lot~! Ryuuji turned his back to the cheery chatter and went to the counter.

“Welcome to Sudoh-bucks!”

It was normal for the employees (who wore black polo shirts and green aprons) to arbitrarily use that store name. Even though they made such an effort to rip off Starbucks, they had a relatively normal menu for a café. Ryuuji ordered two Americanos and returned to the seat where Ami was waiting.

“Were you okay with coffee?”

“Yeah. This place is pretty comfy... it kind of makes me feel like doing homework.” Letting her body sink into the sofa, Ami seemed to be completely captivated by Sudoh-bucks. *That’s right, that’s right, everyone in this town loves Pseudobucks. And everyone knows that a real Starbucks won’t come here even if we waited a hundred years.*

“The cakes are pretty good, too. They’re handmade by the head guy’s daughter.”

“Cake... cake...I’d really like to eat a slice...” *No no.* Ami obstinately shook her head. It may have been unconscious, but her hand went to her belly. It seemed she was determined to resist after suffering a blow from Minori’s Convenience Store Shin Ken just the other day.

Without making any more recommendations, Ryuuji called Kitamura on his

cellphone. "Hey, I just got into Pseudobucks with Ami."

"Good, we saw you as you went in, roger that! Pseudobucks is a great place."

Yes, yes, Ryuuji nodded in agreement with his fellow local from across the phone.

"The stalker also followed you and is watching the window. He's hiding himself in a building entrance's shadow on the other side of the crosswalk. Just stay there for now."

"Got it."

When he hung up, Ami immediately asked about the conversation, "What did Yuusaku say?"

"That guy's hiding in that building over there. He said to just stay here for now."

"...Guh. That's creepy... he really must be watching."

Ami tried to hide in the shadow of the curtain. "Oh, right." She immediately came to a realization and went back to her original position. "If I hide myself like that, there's no point right?"

"Right, right, if he doesn't take pictures, we won't be able to take pictures of him doing that."

"I understand that but...I don't like it. It's creepy..." Ami looked down. Her pretty features contorted into a gagging expression.

"Well, it really is creepy. To have some weirdo sneaking pictures of you."

"That's true, but the thing I really hate isn't just that. Way earlier, that guy put a picture he'd secretly taken into my mailbox...and I really hated that."

"Y-your mailbox?! That means he went right up to your front door! That's..."

Ami waved her hand, *no no no*, to Ryuuji, who had become speechless, then bitterly grimaced. "I hate that he came to my house, of course, but, to me, the photo itself was as much of an issue. I was shopping on the way from work and...I was making a really unpleasant face, like a sulky one. It was obviously the face of a bully. I really got fed up when I saw that...like, is that really my face?! Is

my bare face really that terrible?!”

But you're an absolute beauty, so that's not so bad, Ryuuji thought.

“No, no, I really hate it... that face. I actually hate it. I loathe it. ...I don't want to show that face to anyone.” Ami's lips twisted as she practically spat out the words. To her, this seemed to be something she couldn't forgive, something she resented from the bottom of her heart. It was probably terrible for Ryuuji to say so, but when it came to a problem like that, no one had him beat.

“If you're talking about faces, look at mine. You thought I was a delinquent at first, too, right? It might be because I look so unpleasant, but people walking along the street point at my back. You have it way better, and people call you cute and stuff.”

“Then, Takasu-kun, you can put on a cute face, too.”

“How?”

“Like this. Be like, ‘I'm cute! I'm the cutest!’ Really, seriously, like this.”

Prod. She poked her cheeks with her index fingers. *Grin.* She narrowed her eyes into a sweet grin. *Tilt.* She cutely inclined her head.

I'll do it, then. Don't you end up regretting it.

Ryuuji gave it his all. “Like this?”

Prod, grin, tilt.

“...BFHHH!” Ami sprayed her Americano. She sputtered like that for a while, as if in very real pain. “...Wh...wh...cough...Ta...Taka...cough cough cough!”

“...I know exactly what you're going to say. And I knew before I even got started.”

Covering her mouth with a handkerchief she'd desperately brought out, Ami was in tears. Her face was red from coughing—she'd fallen over on the table, breathing painfully. But, she somehow managed to point at Ryuuji...

“S-scary... cough cough... really...just terrifying!”

“I told you I already knew, didn't I?!”

Her reaction was within the scope he expected, but it still really did hurt. And

he couldn't just tell her how much. "I'll tell you this, but you're doing the same thing. No matter how cute your face is, what you're doing with it at its essence is terrifying. Practically a horror show! That's where it's the same."

"Ahhh, you wound me! Really, stop it, Takasu-kun, how am I and *that* the same?!" *Hehehehehehe*. She laughed like she was having a grand time, after she'd just described his face as "that," there wasn't a reason to hold back anymore.

"It's the same. I didn't want to say it, but your change in personality yesterday was a horror show all by itself. It wasn't because you got angry, but because you thought you could pretend everything was fine and put on your act again right after..."

Of course, he wasn't going to say *I've known your true nature since we first met*. Even what he had already said might have been too much, but he couldn't take it back now. Once the words began flowing out his mouth, he had to continue until he was completely finished.

"Just stop with that mask already. I figured it out a while ago. When you're remaking your mask, whether you're putting on a cute act or whatever, it's unpleasant for whoever has to watch."

In the end, he went that far.

"...Kawashima...?"

Maybe I really did say too much—but, eventually, he noticed Ami's expression.

Ami was still smiling...still wearing her unnatural, soft angel's smile. She carefully watched Ryuuji. Her face didn't change in the slightest to reflect her emotions—she seemed to be pushing everything into that smile. "The thing that happened yesterday? What was that? ...It's like breathing, saying that sort of stuff is a breeze for me. You can't trip me up with something as small as that."

Ryuuji couldn't even tell if the gaze that stared straight at him was cold or hot. What he could tell was just one thing—no matter what he said or what words he used, her iron-clad mask of a smile would repel him. He wouldn't be able to

reach the flesh and blood parts of her that lay beneath.

“I *need* this face. I know that better than anyone.”

“Uh...um...” He didn’t know how to respond to that, but it seemed that Ami didn’t really expect a response. She continued, smile as pristine as ever.

“Whether this has meaning or value or anything like that is a completely different conversation. Yesterday, maybe it didn’t have any. Meaning or value, I mean. What it did have though, was...just the spirit to annoy that annoying shrimp, maybe? Because that shrimp’s face is too funny when I’m near you. When it comes to stuff like that, I just can’t help myself. Though I admit tadpoles were unexpected.”

“...Sorry, this is kind of...I don’t really understand, but...I think I said too much...”

“Hmmm? What are you talking about? Takasu-kun, did you say something to me? I don’t remember aaany of it.”

Meeting Ami’s eyes, which were round with puzzlement, Ryuuji could only lightly suck in a breath. *So this girl is so stubborn about keeping her true self hidden that she’s willing to go as far as this.*

“Come ooon, what’s with that face? You don’t have to think about it that seriously. Because this is a tactic. A tactic to say strange things and make you think about me. ...But there’s really no meaning in all this.”

“...I’m not really following you anymore, Kawashima...”

At Ryuuji’s words, Ami cutely tilted her head, and as though satisfied, laughed. “It’s fine, it’s fine, that’s fine. See, I’m just ‘oblivious.’”

If I really don’t need to understand...then I won’t think about it. Ryuuji shrugged his shoulders and looked at the girl with the split personality who proclaimed herself oblivious. He pretended not to know anything as he sipped his Americano.

Finally, probably ten minutes into the death of all fruitful conversation, Ryuuji’s phone vibrated.

“Hello, Takasu? The situation isn’t that great. It seems the guy can’t take a

good picture of Ami from where he is and gave up. He's reading a manga and waiting until you two leave the store. Sorry for having you go in, could you come out?"

"Yeah, I got it."

He explained the situation to Ami, then together they quickly cleaned up their trays and left Pseudobucks. Kitamura and the others seemed to be checking in on their actions from nearby.

"Sorry about that. Just stick with the original plan and head to the park located down the northwest highway."

"Got it. Kawashima, let's walk this way."

Side by side with Ami, Ryuuji once again started walking at a slow pace, but then Kitamura went on.

"And—I have one other sad piece of news. We've lost private Kushieda."

"...What?!"

Ryuuji unintentionally stopped walking. *The one who suggested this in the first place? Already? Wh-while we weren't even doing anything?*

At his excessive surprise, he unconsciously raised his voice. Ami's eyes opened wide as she looked up him. ...This wouldn't do. If he didn't feign composure, the stalker would suspect something was up.

"Wh...why?"

"She had an emergency call from her part-time job. Rumor on the wind is that they needed her to fill in for someone. Her hiring manager was crying and saying something like *if you don't come in, you're fired*, or rather, *if you don't come in, Kushieda, I'm fired*. She herself was crying as she left the battlefield... Kushieda left a message. She said, *Let's meet again, but actually I'm so sorry*. We lost a good soldier..."

Ryuuji gulped. Minori had left the front, which meant only one thing.

"...Th-then that means right now it's just you and Taiga over there..."

"Private Aisaka is doing well."

“P-put Taiga on the line for a bit, it’s an emergency!”

After a while...

“...Tsk.”

The noise dribbling from the phone was a peculiar way of breathing—one that could just as easily presage speechlessness or a storm of tears.

“T-Taiga...are you okay?!”

“...Wuh...waah.”

It doesn’t seem like she’s okay—Ryuuji vigorously scratched his head. Taiga was in no state to endure being alone with Kitamura. She turned to stone when he so much as approached her. If they had to walk alone together...Taiga would probably die.

“Hey, keep it together! Have you tried a conversation?! Do you have a subject you can talk about?!”

“...F...f.”

“F...fine?! You’re fine?!”

“...Flustered.”

Boop, the line suddenly went dead.

“Huh...huhhh?!”

What just happened. Ryuuji’s mind was blank as he stared at the phone. Taiga (who was already a klutz) was alone with Kitamura, too flustered to even have a conversation with him, and following a stalker, and then the phone had suddenly cut out... his uneasiness was profound.

“Hey, what happened? Just now, that was Yuusaku and everyone, right? Did you have a bad signal?”

“Ah, yeah...for some reason it cut off suddenly...”

“Try calling them back?”

Nodding at Ami’s best advice, he tried calling them again, but the sound that streamed through was, “The phone number you have dialed is disconnected or

no longer availa..." When he tried calling again, he got the same result. He sighed and put the phone away into his pocket.

"You can't reach them? What did Yuusaku say?"

"I-It seems like Kushieda is out, and Taiga seemed to be in trouble. I really wonder what happened... should I try calling again? No, the signal isn't coming in..."

Suddenly, he noticed Ami was staring intently up at him.

"...Wh-what?"

Ami was speechless.

That look didn't seem like fear of the stalker. Instead, it seemed like Ami was searching the depths of Ryuuji's heart. That transparent, but direct and perfectly lucid gaze... more than anything, it made him become flustered. He couldn't put himself at ease...

"Wh-what is it?"

"...Nothing?" She faintly smiled and released Ryuuji from her gaze at the same time. He felt like he'd been saved.

"But I just had a thought. Takasu-kun, you really seem to be kind. Especially when it comes to that girl..."

That girl? Which girl? A little faster than he could ask out loud, the phone in his pocket vibrated once again. It seemed the signal had finally come back. He pressed the accept button. "Yo."

"Uuwuuh...uwah..."

"...T-Taiga?"

He automatically pushed the phone right up to his ear. He didn't know what had happened on the other side of the phone, but he heard Taiga's crying.

"Hey, what happened?!"

"K-Kitamura-kun is..."

"Something happened to Kitamura?!"

At those words, Ami snapped up to look at Ryuuji's face.

"Kitamura-kun got stuck in a storm drain!"

"A storm drain?!"

"Just now, we almost got cut off at the crosswalk and ran in a hurry, then he fell into the drain... Kitamura-kun was completely dirty all over and told me to just leave him behind...!"

"HUH?!"

"A-and, he told me to get as far as I could and gave me the digital camera... and... now I'm alone...!"

This is just stupid, Ryuuji thought. He could hear it faintly on the other side of the phone... *Aisaka! Be careful...!* That distant voice was definitely Kitamura's.

"...Like, seriously, I don't know why I'm doing this anymore..."

"D-don't cry! Umm, right...r-right...for now, umm..."

"AHH!"

"What happened?!"

Without thinking, he stopped in his tracks and breathed in. Just now, that was Taiga's scream.

"...I...I have something to tell you..."

For a moment, he was soothed when she continued speaking, but...

"I just fell in the gutter too. Today is impossible... I'm completely dirty. So's the camera...the plan is a failure, I'm ending the call."

"Wh...what?! Taiga?! Hey, Taiga! ...Sh-she...hung up..."

...What has this come to?

Ryuuji was mostly in a stupor as he stared at the disconnected phone. *What is it with the gutters? Are there really so many over there? Is it that easy to fall in? Are gutters...ugh, gutters...*

"What happened to everyone?! What happened?!"

The situation was hard to believe, but he still needed to explain it to her.

Resolutely, Ryuuji turned again to Ami, who was looking up at him with worry.

“It’s total annihilation. Kitamura and Taiga both fell into gutters.”

“...What? G-gutters?”

They stared at each other blankly for a while. It was now four in the afternoon. The two of them, now left behind, had nowhere to go...

“...No.”

Ami’s shoulders shook. At about the same time, Ryuuji reflexively turned around.

The stalker, who’d shaken off Kitamura and Taiga, was standing mere meters away. He probably hadn’t even known he’d been a mark. Calm as can be, he carried his phone in one hand and looked as though he were checking his messages—but the flash on his phone’s camera was left on. He might have been taking a video.

“L-let’s go...”

Ami’s brow furrowed, the color disappeared from her face, and she started running at a jog. Ryuuji quickly ran after her. He allowed himself the naive thought that there was no way they’d be followed...

“Wai...what’s with that guy...?”

The man was boldly running after them, still holding up his cellphone camera.

The place is deserted. If something happens, do I have the confidence to do anything by myself? Ryuuji pondered while he ran. Why was it that normally, when he didn’t need it, people were completely terrified of him—but in moments when it was vitally important, his glare was useless? Was he being completely underestimated right now? When he glanced quickly behind him, he got his answer. The man was enthralled with the phone screen and only focused on recording Ami. Ryuuji was just some kid—and it was probably true—the man was probably looking down on him. If his (prodigal) father, who he inherited his sharp eyes from, had been the one glaring, the situation would probably be different.

“What should we do? He’s still on us!” Ami was at her wit’s end. At her voice,

Ryuuji's heart also sank. They had to lose him somehow. Somehow, without anything happening, they needed to get back to their everyday world.

"Uhh...the closest police station from here is...ugh, damn it, it's pretty far! But maybe we can manage to make it anyhow!"

"I don't want to do this anymore...!" Ami, pitifully, was almost half-crying. Her voice quivered with tears. "Why do I have to be in a situation like this?! It's all his fault that everything's messed up! Yuusaku might even be hurt... seriously, what can I do now?!"

If the only one who had been left here with Ami was Kitamura, he might have turned around, thrown down the gauntlet, and fought. He was an idiot who could fall into a gutter, but his pluck and sense of justice were the real deal. And he probably wouldn't have let a girl cry like this—if only, if only though.

Ryuuji at least wanted to hold Ami's hand as she ran away to encourage her. But with Ami desperately running, it didn't seem like the right time. Ryuuji could only catch her fists. He was unable to do it, unable to protect Ami as her quivering voice grew louder.

"I took a break from work, and moved, and even transferred schools over that good-for-nothing loser...! But then, in the end, I'm still in the same situation! What is this...and in the end, all I can do is run away again! No matter where I run, he'll follow me...what should I be doing?!"

"K-Kawashima!"

Gradually growing more agitated, Ami pitched her voice louder and louder. She seemed about to snap again as her voice went higher still. Before he knew it, the voice that he thought had been shaking from tears seemed to overflow with rage.

"Hey, he can hear you! ...If you provoke him too much..."

"But I'm pissed off!" Ami's voice snapped, like she was ready to bite him. "Because of that loser, I've been so agitated and so stressed out, I've been completely pigging out! My stomach's going to turn jiggly! If it keeps like this, I really *will* have to give up being a model...like, what is *that*?! HUH?! Unbelievable! Just how hard do you think it's been for me?! But with this fat...

with... with this belly... it's *fat!*"

Seeing that fierce look from the side of his eye, Ryuuji gasped. Up until now, her profile had been tearful. Now, her lips were lifted, veins were standing out on her temple, both her eyes were narrowed, and her nose was wrinkled into a snarl. It was exactly like a Chihuahua baring its teeth. This was the true Ami.

"What the hell...damn it...that means, am I really being beaten by that worthless loser?!"

She had arrived. Ami-chan was here.

"This Ami-chan, beaten and ruined by that pervert! Agh! Damn it, what the hell?! It really makes me angry..it really makes Ami-chan...so...angry...! Argh!"

"K-Kawashima...hey, hold up a second..."

"Takasu-kun, you said it, right? Stop with the mask... you just said that to me, right? Well, I get it. I'll stop. Ami-chan's done. I'll stop, I'll stop, I'll stop, I—will—stooooop! I'll live with my terrible personality on my face, I'll *live on!*"

"Wai-that's...not what I..."

"SHUT UP! That shrimp, Aisaka Taiga, wasn't losing to that guy! So Ami-chan won't let him just keep doing what he wants, either! And I have a guy with me! I'm gonna show that stalker! Don't underestimate the daughter of an actress!"

There beside Ryuuji (who was at a loss for words), Ami suddenly made a one eighty. He realized too late that she'd turned on her heel.

"HYYYYYAAAAAA!!!"

She dashed out fiercely with all her strength, aiming at the man behind them. She swung around her bag, pretty features distorted into those of an ogre.

"Hah?! Huuh?!"

It wasn't unreasonable for the man to run away. The pursuer became the pursued in an instant role reversal.

"GET BACK HERE YOU SCUMBAAAAAG!"



The man ran away desperately, Ami just behind, spitting out her scorn.

Of course, Ryuuji couldn't just stand by and watch. "Don't be stupid! Stop it! Calm down! Even though I look like this, I can't stand fights!"

But Ryuuji's words seemed to fall on deaf ears. He saw the man run into the park.

"THERE!"

With an amazing leap like a fawn, Ami jumped over the shrubs. She cut him off with the short cut, and readied her finishing blow.

"DAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

She threw her bag at him. The rectangular bag tumbled and flew low through the air.

"GAH!"

It hit the running man's feet. As the things he carried flew from his arms, he dove face-first into the sand.

Without hesitation, Ami picked up the man's fallen phone.

"...Haah....haah...haah...!"

With the face of an ogre, she was still out of breath, speechless.

Crack crack crack!

...She broke it right in half.

"H-horri..."

She tossed the two pieces of wreckage down before the man, who was backing away in terror. But she still wasn't done.

"Haah... you've got another one... Ami-chan saw it... take it out... take out the camera...NOW! Hurry up and fork it over!"

"...I-It's there..."

The man shakily pointed at the ejected contents of his bag. A state-of-the-art model camera indeed was laying there. Ami bent down and took it into her hand. For a while, she turned it around, pressing buttons. She fiddled with it for

a bit, like she was trying to figure out how to delete the data.

“S-stop! You’ll break it!”

“...Haah...haah...”

The man didn’t quite grasp the position he was in. And his voice seemed to have touched on Ami’s nerves. Still breathing roughly, she took the strap of the camera in her hand.

“HI-YAH!”

...And after twirling it around for a while, she used its centrifugal force to smash it against a concrete bench.

“WAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!” The man was shrieking. As was maybe expected from a state-of-the-art camera, its casing withstood one or two attacks (though who knew about the inside).

“TAKE THAT! TAKE! THAT! TAKE THAT!

...TAAAKE THAAAAAT!”

After suffering repeated atrocities, the camera at long last cracked with a satisfying crunch. Pieces that never should have disconnected came falling down. But Ami kept right on hitting it against the bench.

“DAH! DAAAH! DAAAAHHH! Break...BREAK...! Into pieces...BREAAAK!”

...Ami must have built up a lot of stress. She kept hitting it again and again, with the strap still in her hand, until the camera no longer looked like a camera. The man, half-buried in sand, was already soundlessly crying. Seeing that picture of hell before him, Ryuuji couldn’t find words to address either of them.

“Uhh, wha, my camera...”

“There...I wonder what should I break next? Ami-chan’s kind of having fun now. Oh?”

Ami ground the wreckage of the dispersed and broken digital camera under her heel. She cruelly twisted her lips into a smile.

“Hey, can Ami-chan break some more? Can Ami-chan break eeeeverything? Are you even listening? Answer me! Should I break *you* in the same way?”

“P-please forgive me!”

The man prostrated himself in the sand, and with his hands shaking, firmly faced Ami.

“Can you promise me that you won’t follow me around anymore?”

“I don’t need to swear, I’ve already had way more than enough!” the man, who had become strangely childlike, cried pathetically. “Now that you’ve shown me that demonic face, I won’t anymore! Ami-chan isn’t my angel anymore! You’re a liar—you’re really an ogre! You’re pitch-black! I don’t want to be involved with a fraud like you anymore! The cute angel Ami-chan never actually existed! ‘Ami-chan’—what a joke! Come to think of it, why are you with that scary delinquent?! I just noticed him!”

“H-how am I supposed to be the delinquent here...?”

It seemed that rather than his shattered camera, his shattered dreams were what the man was really struggling with. There was no sign he was planning a counterattack. He just raised his voice and kept on shamefully crying. Ami was lucky he wasn’t a “real” danger who would do something like wave around a knife.

At last, the man spoke his last words:

“You’ve got a terrible personality!”

“So what?” Ami shot back coldly. As though she had just remembered it, she pulled a hand mirror out of her uniform pocket. Then she looked at her reflection, smiled, and made a cutesy pose.

“Ami-chan is this cute. ♥ Her personality doesn’t matter. ♥”

Ami’s show of courage only endured until they left the park and turned the first corner.

“Here, sit! Move those newspapers!”

“Uwaah... wah...”

Ryuuji led Ami, practically carrying her, and tried to sit her down on cushions,

but...

“I-I can’t let go.” Ami looked up at Ryuuji, tears streaming from her eyes. The fingers she used to grab onto Ryuuji’s arms were shaking, frozen so stiff that she couldn’t peel them off by herself.

“Just relax. Take all the time you need.”

The setting sun’s rays pierced into the Takasus’ two-bedroom home. Sitting on the burned tatami mats, Ami closed her eyes and desperately tried to regain control of her breath.

Ami had been fine while laying into the stalker...but as she had lumbered down the sidewalk and turned the corner, she’d suddenly fallen to her knees. “I-I was so scared!”

She’d shuddered all over. Tears had dripped from her eyes. Her whole body had been tensed up with nerves, and Ryuuji had had to halfway carry her. She was in no state to walk or stand alone. Even her dry lips had been shaking—she certainly couldn’t go on by herself.

The Takasus’ house wasn’t that far if you went around the park. So, somehow, he’d managed to lend her his shoulder and bring her in.

“...Where the heck is Yasuko when you need her?”

Ryuuji sat Ami down on the cushion and went into the kitchen. He looked around his own silent home, troubled. He couldn’t believe that no one was there. If he’d known, he would have called a taxi to take Ami back to her own house. Bringing a crying girl home to an empty house wasn’t something Ryuuji could handle. Even a girl who wasn’t crying was out of the question. As for Taiga? That was just one big exception.

At any rate, in order to calm Ami down, he brought over milk he’d heated up on the stove and sweetened with honey.

“Th-thank you...”

“If you want more, you can have as much as you want. If you don’t like sweet things, I have tea or coffee... or actually just coffee, I guess.”

“...No, this is fine...” Ami took a sip and finally let out one long breath. “It’s

good. Hey, could you put in more sugar?”

“It’s honey, is that okay?”

Ami nodded, and he carefully dripped some honey into her cup. After he mixed it up with a spoon, Ami’s lips finally lit up with a pale smile. “...How unexpected. Takasu-kun, do you drink stuff like this?”

“No, not so much. Taiga’s the one who likes it that way.” After he accidentally blurted that out, Ryuuji glanced up at Ami and noticed her looking up at him.

“...Taiga. Takasu-kun, you always call Aisaka ‘Taiga,’ right?”

“It’d be weirder to hide it, so I’ll tell you.” *It’s not really an excuse, because there isn’t a reason to need an excuse in the first place*—that was his preface. “We live pretty close by, and she lives alone, and I just live with my mom, but that’s mostly like living alone so... well, somehow or another... you could say I’m helping her with chores, but we started eating together, kind of like siblings...”

“...Hmm. So that’s how it is.”

He wasn’t sure if she accepted his explanation or not, but Ami didn’t say anything more about it.

“This really is good. I think I’ll try my own version at home.” She held the cup in both hands, the hot milk now flavored with a considerable amount of honey. She kept on drinking, lapping it up.

“How are you feeling?”

At his inquiring voice, Ami raised just her eyes. With the cup still at her mouth, she smiled, as though embarrassed. Then she suddenly turned her face to the side. “Ahhh, seriously...it’s just humiliating! And after I committed so hard to going after him, too! I really thought I had what it takes, but...in the end, you had to put up with seeing me turn into a terrified, shaking mess.”

“That just comes with the territory. Because as soon as you started running, I was terrified, too. You were seriously lucky that guy didn’t get violent.”

“...I’m really sorry.” Ami finally turned back and put the empty cup on the table. Maybe it was because of the setting sun shining on her cheeks, but she was faintly dyed in pale orange. Her brown eyes looked like transparent amber.

“I can’t believe it myself... if my mom finds out, she’d kill me for doing something as dangerous as that. Maybe it’s Aisaka Taiga’s influence? Yesterday, I saw her chasing away that stalker guy so easily at the riverbank, and then, I suddenly got embarrassed that I was scared. And I guess you could say... I kind of felt...like she’d shown me up, somehow...”

“...Taiga is kind of a special case. I’m not sure you want to use her as a benchmark.”

“The Palmtop Tiger, right? I heard it from Maya-chan and everyone. Hah, it fits her too well, that nickname. Since crossing paths with the Palmtop Tiger, maybe I’ve grown a little braver, myself.”

“...Kawashima, you were a strong girl from the start.”

“A strong girl? Aha, I’m just messed up. I’m saying this about myself, but Ami-chan is a really messed up girl, and inside her belly is darkness. I’m a mean girl—you know that now, don’t you? Maybe since yesterday... or maybe even before that. There’s no point to putting on my act again at this point.”

Ami shrugged and laughed. It wasn’t her normal mask. Somewhere in her big eyes lurked the glimmer of an awakened arrogance. Her mouth was warped with a slight hint of what you might call cruelty. There was no trace of an angel’s purity there. In its place, what her face revealed was her slyness and mercilessness, a real spite—the arrogance of a person who didn’t think of others as people. But somehow...it was still beautiful.

But at the same time, something about that face made Ryuuji feel awfully judgmental...

“Oh. I forgot about the other two. Who both...fell into gutters...somehow.”

“If she’s with Yuusaku, she’s fine,” said Ami—though Taiga being with Yuusaku was probably exactly what was dangerous. Her expression faded after she spoke, remembering the two. Her smiling face slowly tensed up, and she quietly held her breath. She looked as though she were trying to endure a faint pain. “That girl has it good.”

“That girl... you mean Taiga?”

Without answering, Ami looked down. “...For example, like with that stalker

earlier...it's easy to get people like that to like you. If you just put a little effort into being cute in pictures or on TV, people can't help but like you. ...See, because Ami-chan is super cute!"

She said those last words as though they were a joke, but Ryuuji didn't feel like laughing. When Ami dropped those words, he looked at her hard-set profile—and he didn't see anything to laugh about.

"...It's more or less just as easy to get people to hate you. If I told everyone that this isn't the real Ami-chan, that this isn't what I'm actually like... if I showed them the real Ami, everyone would just hate me."

Ryuuji averted his gaze in spite of himself. Ami's self-effacing expression was so pitiful he couldn't look—though if he told her that, she would definitely be hurt even more. "You shouldn't say something like that."

"But it's true. The guy just now was just like that, right? What's difficult is getting someone to like the real me. That's it right there. That's why that girl... that's why I'm jealous of Aisaka Taiga. That girl doesn't even *feel* like she needs to keep up appearances. But you don't hate her at all, not even a bit. That's a little... no, that's *extremely* frustrating. And I tried to steal you away from her just because I wanted to see that girl frustrated...and I couldn't get so much as a grip on you. That's a first. 'Why?' I thought. 'Ami-chan is definitely cuter, so why? How can I fail to be number one? Isn't this unbelievable? Isn't this unforgivable? Are she and I so different?' ...I really am jealous of that girl, aren't I?"

Ryuuji quietly breathed in.

Ami was jealous of Taiga. Taiga was so jealous of Ami that she holed up to cry by herself. They each wanted the things that the other had. In the end, they were just both the way they were, so things were bound not to go well. Their feelings naturally clashed, and unlike Taiga and Minori, they didn't have the rapport they needed to stick close together. That was just the way it was—and there was definitely nothing anybody could do to change it.

Although Ami had said Taiga didn't feel the need to put up appearances, there was one thing he wanted to say, for Taiga's sake. He wanted to say it for the part of Taiga that desperately put up appearances in ways no one except

Ryuuji could see. “Kawashima, you’ve got Kitamura though.”

“Yuusaku?”

“That guy, he really worries about you, thinks about you, and takes care of you. He really understands the real you. He even got stuck in a gutter for you.”

“You’re right. But...Yuusaku is no good.” A tendril of her hair slipped and fell over her face. At that moment, Ami’s expression was hidden from Ryuuji.

“Because Yuusaku has already chosen the one and only girl he likes.”

“...Huh?”

Ryuuji’s brain stalled.

He immediately thought of the person Kitamura had confessed to right after enrollment—Taiga. But Kitamura had plainly told Taiga he just wanted to be friends. Regardless of whether Taiga accepted that, he didn’t behave like she was the girl he liked. At least, he wasn’t acting like that at the present. But who was it? If it was new, then Minori? Or maybe Maya? Or maybe...

“What about you, Takasu-kun...?”

Ryuuji’s heart jumped.

With her body arched like a cat’s, Ami’s face drew near. She didn’t make so much as a sound. He could smell the milk on her breath. Not daring to look at Ami’s face, Ryuuji just shuffled backwards on his butt—but his back immediately hit the wall.

Ami didn’t come any closer.

She didn’t come any closer, but he felt like he was being drawn into the bottom of those damp, amber eyes...

“...Takasu-kun, if I showed you the real me...what would you do?”

“Wh-what would I?”

“...Would you like me?”

The world was robbed of sound.

Ryuuji’s feet hit the legs of the table. In the silence, the cup rolled onto the tatami.

They were five centimeters from their noses touching.

Right at the last moment—right before it was too late to play it off as a joke—Ami’s lips suddenly lifted up into a smirk.

“...Just kidding! Did I get your heart racing?”

And it *was* a joke, but... the only ones who would see it as a joke were the two of them.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, oh dearie me...”

Thump. Thump. At the sound of plastic bags being dropped onto the tatami, Ryuuji pretty much jumped.

Ami reflexively turned. She was straddling the lower half of Ryuuji’s body.

Ryuuji reflexively turned. He was nonchalantly supporting her waist.

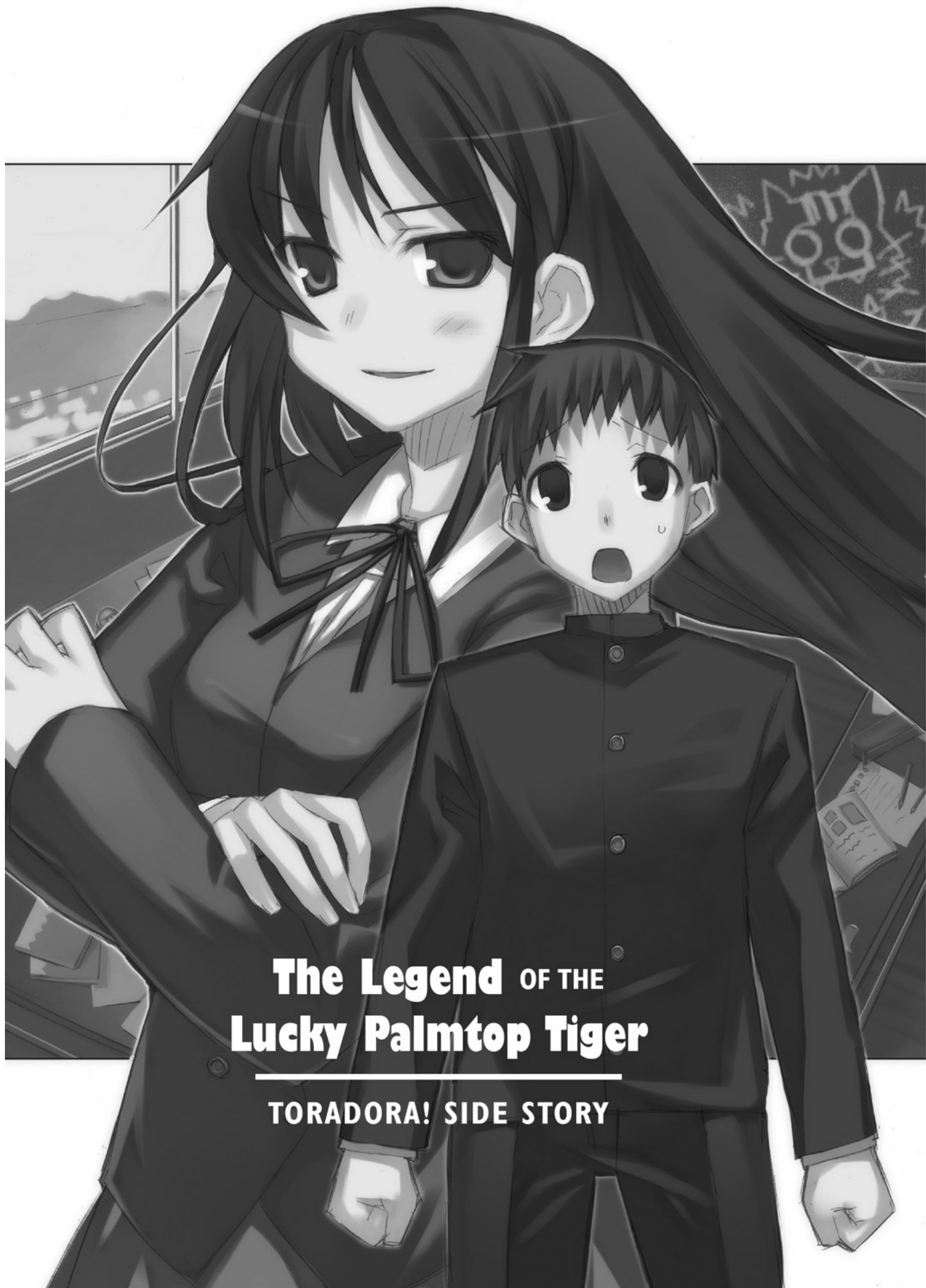
“...Oopsie! I...I didn’t do this on purpose, promise! Umm... I went shopping and I found Kitamura-kun and Taiga-chan stuck in the storm gutters, and then... uhhmm... ahhh, this is awkwardrrrd!”

Yasuko brought both her hands to her bare face and wriggled around in a pose reminiscent of Munch’s “The Scream.”

Behind her, Kitamura’s whole body was covered in mud. He looked to be in a terrible state. He tried to push his bent glasses up his nose, using a wooden sword as a cane in his other hand.

And then there was Taiga, who also was covered all over in mud. “No way...” Taiga, who was being carried on Kitamura’s back. At the sight of Ryuuji and Ami, she was struck dumb—both eyes wide open.

In an obscure corner of the room, wholly unnoticed, Inko-chan shed fluffy feathers from her whole body. As it turned out, she’d seen everything.



**The Legend OF THE
Lucky Palmtop Tiger**

TORADORA! SIDE STORY

Side Story:

The Legend of the Lucky Palmtop Tiger

He was on the third floor of the old school building.

Even though it was after classes had ended, there was no sign of any students in that dim hallway. Under broken, fluorescent lighting, Tomiie Kouta walked with a gloomy expression illuminated by the lights' cheerless, flickering buzz.

He finally arrived at a door. A scrap of notebook paper was stuck against it with scotch tape, scribbled on with pencil.

It said, "Student Council Room."

Ahhhh, Kouta sighed. With dark eyes, he looked down at the old doorknob. He came by this place every day, and for what...?

"DAAAH HAHAHAHA!"

"...That's got to be the president."

He was in danger of being blown away by the mere power of the overly hearty laugh that resonated from behind the door, but he stood his ground. He automatically pictured that laughter's source.

What came to mind was their trustworthy personality and, on occasion, strict paternal love... the popular nicknames of "godfather" and "patriarch" were all too fitting for this very "masculine" person. It wasn't that Kouta hated their style, but sometimes, it was a little much...

"Excuse me."

...It happened at the same time he opened the door and stepped in.

"Ohh! You're late, my first-year lad! Hurry up and sit, sit!"

"...Phew."

It had been several weeks since they'd met, but he still hadn't gotten used to the owner of that laugh.

“What’s wrong? That was a pretty lifeless response.” *Tsk*. He heard a tongue click, but immediately after came a show of white teeth and a generous laugh. “Have a bite of this,” said the manly individual in question, and threw a snack at him.

That macho soul in fact had the incredibly feminine name of Kanou Sumire.

But there was more to her than that.

“President, sorry for the intrusion, but it’s about the data from the previous year’s proposed budget.”

“Right, I’ll see that, give it here.”

Slip... the black, silky strands of her hair spilled softly over her delicate shoulders. Her downcast eyes and pale Japanese complexion were just a skin she wore.

The student body president, Kanou Sumire.

Since enrolling in the school, she had been a hardcore honors student who never wavered from her position at the top of the class. In addition, she had a little sister, Kanou Sakura, who was two years younger than her and a first year in the same school. Among the students, they were known as the Kanou sisters. In other words, Sumire was the president, the patriarch, and the elder of the Kanou sisters.

“Hey, Kouta. You were eating by yourself again today, weren’t you? I passed by your class and saw it with my own two eyes—you all by yourself.”

“...Please leave it be.”

Perched at a window seat, holding papers in one hand, Sumire was staring at Kouta with a grin on her face...while manspreading. It seemed she had no intention to leave it be.

“So you still haven’t made aaany friends. We’re almost at the end of May, you realize? It’s been two whole months since school started.”

There was no consideration in the cherry-blossom-colored lips that spoke those words. Kouta was silent. He turned his back to Sumire and dropped his eyes to the activity log.

“You’re a first-year lad, yet you’re an outcast.”

“Now, now, president.” The one who threw him a lifeline was the second-year vice president, Kitamura Yuusaku. With his silver-rimmed, severe glasses glinting, he jumped into the conversation with a gentle tone. “Kouta enrolled one month late, so he hasn’t even been here for a full month.”

“Right, that *was* how it went down!” Sumire slapped her hands together in understanding. “What was it again—you were hit by a car right before our enrollment ceremony, right?”

“...No. I was hit by the car on the day before the ceremony at my first choice school.”

“Right, right, let’s see—oh right, your neighbor’s house caught on fire and when they hosed it down, your own house was flooded...”

“That was the day before a school trip in middle school. The day before the ceremony, what I thought was a horrible stomachache was actually my appendix. When I went out to a restaurant to celebrate, it ruptured, and I ended up pulling down other people’s tables as I collapsed—”

“Yes! And then you were hospitalized for a month!”

With the President’s finger pointing at him, Kouta could only keep silent and look down. The next words Sumire let lose were ones he already knew were coming.

“You sure are an unlucky fellow!” *Daaahahahahaha!*

...What was so funny, exactly?

“President, you’re laughing too much. You’ll make Kouta feel bad.”

That hearty laugh—strong enough to even bring on a rebuke from Kitamura—continued to resound. It got to the point that even the clerks going about their duties (both of them second years, older than him) had quivering shoulders while pretending to be engrossed in their work.

If you’re going to laugh, then laugh. Kouta sulkily pouted and turned away. *Sorry for being so unlucky.* But what could he do? That was just the way it was.

Whenever Kouta’s fate was in the balance, the scales inevitably came down

on the side of trouble. It had been that way from the moment he'd dropped into this world to the present day. Incidentally, the moment he came out crying from his mother's womb, his father's video camera ran out of batteries, and the doctor, distracted by that, missed the moment his mother had finished her difficult task and dropped the newborn Kouta past her crotch.

The trouble had just continued to the present day. At any rate, he'd made the unfortunate decision to join this student council of his own free will.

It was shortly after entering high school—his entrance delayed because of the particular circumstances of his life—when Kouta noticed he was in limbo in his class. For starters, he didn't have a cheerful personality. He'd thought he might join a club to make friends, but the invitation season for new members was long past, and the opportunity to join was completely robbed from him.

Although he wasn't despised, trying to endure the class recesses without a single friend was incredibly taxing. One day, as he was thinking about what he could do, a poster had appeared in front of Kouta's eyes.

"Wanted: General Affairs members! Big welcome to new students! Join the Student Council!"

General Affairs... basically, that probably means helping with paperwork, he thought. It wasn't like he had an interest in helping with desk work for the student council. But the words *big welcome to new students* seemed to sparkle in Kouta's eyes for that moment. It was like the last door on the last train that he was already late to ride was still open—that was the feeling he had.

He just needed to get to know the other first year students in General Affairs. And maybe, if he became Tomiie Kouta of the student council, he would be able to escape his current station as a nonexistent waste of air. That was the thought.

He summoned his courage and headed to the student council room. Even now, he could clearly remember how he felt as he opened that door for the first time.

A beautiful, black-haired Yamato Nadeshiko—the concept of the ideal

Japanese woman—turned around as though surprised. That he would be able to work on student council activities with such a beauty was beyond his expectations. It was a rare moment—he almost thought he was lucky. But then the beauty said, “Yo!” and lifted her fist at him in a manly way. She plunked down on her chair with her legs splayed. “You’re a first year, right?! Something wrong? Go on, grab a seat!” *Thump!* She kicked an open seat for him.

...*Flub.* The strength left his knees. The one who’d been lying in wait for Kouta was a tough guy—wearing a Yamato Nadeshiko skin.

There weren’t any other first years in General Affairs, and for starters, when he reported his student council position to his homeroom teacher, she hadn’t even known about it. “Huh? You went into General Affairs?”

On the other hand, he couldn’t just quit because the truth of the student council had been a little bit different from his arbitrary expectations. So Kouta made sure to go to the student council room every day after school, where he was the only student working on troublesome, daily minutiae.

This really wasn’t meant for him.

“Aaahh... I’d love to touch that Palmtop Tiger...” It slipped right out of him... mixed with a sigh. He’d only meant to think it to himself.

“...Hm?” Kitamura reacted first. “What did you just say about the Palmtop Tiger?”

“Kitamura-senpai, does that mean you’ve heard about it?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question.” Sumire’s affectionate whip—the corner of her notebook—prodded the top of Kouta’s head.

“Ow! Hey, what gives? I can’t help it! I’m just curious about it, okay?”

The corner of the notebook dug in deeper, sawing rapidly into Kouta’s head.

“Aaah, that burns!”

“Don’t underestimate the notebook. Pulp is the essence of mighty trees. So spit it out, why do you want to touch the Tiger?”

“Y-you’re relentless... my classmates were talking about it, okay?”

When you touch the Palmtop Tiger, you'll be blessed with good fortune for the next three years until graduation!

Kouta had heard about it being one of the seven wonders of the school right at the same time Sumire had seen him alone that day during lunch break. Even though he hadn't been intentionally listening to the conversation behind him, it had caught his ears all the same.

"Hmph. Unlucky. You wanted to touch the Palmtop Tiger, but since you weren't friends, you couldn't bring yourself to ask for details. Just how shy are you, anyway?!"

Kouta turned his back on Sumire and muttered darkly, "It's fine. Please leave it be. I was just curious, that's all. I wasn't serious. It's probably no better than a good luck charm anyway."

"No, you're wrong." Kitamura's voice suddenly reverberated loudly through the room. "Nah, this tiger's real. I've seen the Palmtop Tiger before."

"Huh?! Really?!"

Sumire oddly didn't seem surprised, either. She put up a graceful hand. "I've seen the Palmtop Tiger, too."

The other members exchanged glances, and following the president, raised their hands. "Yup." "Me too." "And me."

"Senpai, you've all seen the Palmtop with your own eyes?"

"Yeah, the Palmtop is especially notorious among the second years. ...But the Legend of the Lucky Palmtop Tiger? Guess the legend gets bigger with each retelling. To think the Palmtop's been made into such a big deal..."

Kitamura chuckled. He looked like he could hardly handle it. Every member except for Sumire had an odd grin.

"...Uhhh, guys, what's so funny?" Kouta couldn't quite decode what was going on. He glanced around, vainly trying to get a feel for what was happening.

"I've got it!" Sumire suddenly raised her voice. "Kouta, you have to touch the Palmtop Tiger."

"...Huh?"

“An unlucky fellow like you in our group is a liability. Your bad luck might affect the whole student council. So consider this a presidential order. You absolutely must touch the Palmtop Tiger and cure your misfortune.”

“Even if you tell me to do that, I don’t even know what the Palmtop Tiger is.”

“You can just ask your classmates. Start tomorrow off by gathering information, first thing!”

“This seems like a fool’s errand...”

“Excuse me?”

In front of Sumire’s sharp, piercing eyes, Kitamura once again jumped in with a “Now, now.” He went on, “It’d be difficult to have him do it so suddenly. Kouta, first off, we’ll give you a hint. In my class, the second-year class C, there’s a certain person named Kushieda who you can visit. Out of everyone I know within this school, she’s the one who knows the most about the Palmtop Tiger.”

“That was...Kushieda...senpai?”

Yeah, Kitamura nodded. He flashed an appealing smile as he looked down at Kouta.

“...Kitamura-senpai.”

“Hm?”

“You seem like you’re having a lot of fun, for some reason.”

“Yeah, I might be.”

It was always kind of hard to understand what was in the bottom of those intelligent eyes, behind those glasses. Even now, all smiles, he seemed to look through Kouta, piercing him with a straight, silent gaze.

Kouta thought of Kitamura as a kind upperclassman. Maybe it was because he was Sumire’s right-hand man, but he felt there was something up with the group gathered in the student council room.

After all, he had a predisposition for super bad luck. He decided to play dumb, but as he stared at the upperclassmen’s faces, there was suspicion in his eyes.

Okay, Kouta. First, the Palmtop Tiger is real. And second, the Palmtop's a ferocious terror that isn't going to be easy to touch.

As a special favor, Sumire had given him a hint. But with a hint that small, he still couldn't tell what the Palmtop Tiger was, or what form it would take. *In cases like this, it would normally be something like a bronze statue, right?*

"...Honestly, this is just coercion, at this point..."

It was the next day. Rather obediently, he stood in front of the door to the second-year class C.

After all, Sumire had given him the forceful warning—*if you ignore a presidential order, you'll be in trouble.*

"Uhh, in other words...you mean I'd be fired?" What else could it be, anyway?

"No. I'd force you to become the next student body president."

"Wouldn't the next student president be a current second year?"

"Congratulations on becoming the first-ever first year president!"

"Yeah, I'd rather not..."

And so he lowered his gloomy face and unsteadily made his way to a classroom of upperclassmen all by himself. He peeked into the classroom for a while without revealing himself, but he was at a loss when he couldn't find Kitamura, who he was depending on. It seemed that all he could do was ask someone to bring out the person named Kushieda.

"Um, excuse me."

"Yes?"

He put all his effort into flagging down an upperclassman girl who happened to be walking by.

"What is it?" The person who turned around had a bright smile on her face. Her kind-looking brown eyes turned to Kouta—her round cheeks were lit up with a grin, and her pink lips were lustrous and shiny. From head to toe, she was too bright. Straightforward, honest, and healthy, she was completely different from a certain tough guy.

“Uh, umm...it’s, I’m looking for someone named Kushieda-senpai—”

“Yessss!”

“In...this...class...?”

He looked at her hand, which she had stretched to reach toward the heavens. Kouta tilted his head for a while. *Umm, I guess since she said, “Yesss!” and stretched up her hand, this development means...*

“I’m Kushieda!”

“Oh.”

Of cooourse. She was cute, but a little strange. He felt his spirits sink again. Everyone he had come across so far seemed a little weird, but that was probably just because his natural bad luck was a siren call to them.

“Hey you, don’t just say ‘Oh!’ Don’t leave someone hanging!” She acted awfully familiar—she pushed one of his shoulders and he wobbled dangerously. But he somehow held his ground and kept facing forward.

“Kitamura-senpai said the he would introduce us...” From the sheer desire to avoid being teased by Sumire, he took on the challenge that was Kushieda.

“Kitamura-kun? Nu-uh, he didn’t say anything to me.”

“Uhh...”

No way. As he recalled Kitamura’s bespectacled face, Kouta faltered. This meant that he had to tell her about the circumstances of his search for the Palmtop Tiger, starting from the very beginning, here and now. That was a little embarrassing. He was a first year going out of his way to a classroom of upperclassmen to ask, “Excuse me, do you know where the ‘Palmtop Tiger’ is?” That kind of made him seem like he was actually serious about it, and that was a little awkward...

“Yo, Kushieda! This is Tomiie Kouta, a first year. He’s looking into the Palmtop Tiger, so I told him about you. I told him that was a subject Kushieda knows all about! Anyway, see ya!”

...And then, like a gust of wind, Kitamura passed by and easily explained everything that had been embarrassing. And left.

Then Kouta noticed something. “Huh?”

Without so much as a warning, Kushieda’s eyes simultaneously turned harsh and dark. “You’re looking into the Palmtop Tiger, are you...?”

“...Senpai, your tone of voice is kind of...”

“Shut yer yap.” To cut off Kouta’s escape route, Kushieda leaned against the doorway and stretched her arm across to the wall. Her bright smile was no more, now completely withdrawn. Her head tilted, chin out, slightly crooked...

“And what are you planning on doing after looking into the Palmtop Tiger...?” She spoke in a low, husky voice and stared at him searchingly.

“Ahh, that’s...I’m going to touch it...”

“Touch it? You’re going to touch it? You want to touch it. So you want to touch it.”

“...That was four times you said that. Uhh, well...”

Huff, Kushieda’s prolonged exhalation shifted Kouta’s bangs. “Do you have insurance? You’re gonna need real good insurance—injury insurance.”

“I do have that, actually.” Honestly, for someone who was born with a predisposition toward bad luck like him, having several kinds of insurance was a given—plans with fully maxed out policies for any and all contingencies.

Uh-huh, Kushieda listened to that response and nodded deeply. “Listen here, young one...it seems you still don’t know what kind of thing the Palmtop Tiger really is...”

“Uhh. But that’s why I came to ask.”

“No matter what you hear from this old hag’s lips, you still won’t understand... the one thing this hag can tell you is... the ‘Palmtop’ part of the Palmtop Tiger’s name is referring to its size...”

Hag? Kouta didn’t follow.

A noise exploded right in front of him. “Ack! *Cough! Cough, cough, cough!*”

“K-Kushieda-senpai, are you okay? ...Huuuh?!”

...*GOGH!* As though she were calling out the great painter’s name, the self-

styled hag Kushieda mussed up her hair, slipped down, and collapsed to one knee.

“Um, this is a performance, right? You’re joking, right?”

“This hag...is done for. You can ask...about the rest...from the one named... Takasu...”

And then in the hallway during their break, she pretended to fall over flat as though she were dead. Her skirt also flipped up, exposing her white underwear and butt for the whole world to see, but she didn’t make any signs that she was in a rush to fix it. Normally this would be incredibly lucky, enough to give him a nosebleed, but... *What should I do? I’ve gotten mixed up with someone weird, and not just a little weird, either...*

“...Um...who’s Takasu?”

The passing classmates just stepped over Kushieda’s body. Finally one girl said, “Hey, watch your underwear. Underwear!” and fixed the flipped-up skirt. But even then, Kushieda remained collapsed on the ground as she aimed a finger towards one corner of the classroom. Over there, several second-year boys were having fun chatting.

Guh. Kouta swallowed his breath. Within that group, one person had noticed him and turned around.

“...Kushieda, what are you doing?”

Shall I beat you to a pulp?

The guy’s voice held that kind of tone. That sharp gaze was no amateur’s. His mean-looking features were twisted in irritation. He fidgeted, menacing everyone in his vicinity with the incredibly dangerous aura that exuded from his whole body. Why was there such a transcendent delinquent in this tiny high school?

Then it came to him.

This delinquent was definitely Takasu.

Kouta’s fortunes always flowed in the least desirable direction, so that definitely *had* to be Takasu. *I think I’m good, I’ll go back to my class.* Kouta was

quick in coming to that appropriate conclusion, but...

“Takasu-kun...this young’un seems to have business with ya...”

“Wha?!”

Just a moment too soon, Kushieda, who should have been dead, politely called Takasu over.

The one who replied “Whaaaat?” was, unsurprisingly, that delinquent boy. His eyes glinted, and his chair screeched as he stood. He wasn’t that large, but the power emanating from his body as he stood up was terrible enough that the air behind him seemed to warp.

Licking his dry lips to moisten them, Takasu approached. At full speed, on long strides, he stepped, stepped, stepped over.

“Eeek!” Reflexively, Kouta turned on his heels. He jumped to change direction and tried to make a dash for it, when...

“Ah!”

“...Tsk!”

He felt a hard impact against his chest. He had run into someone. Tottering, he turned around. “I’m sorry!”

“...Oww...”

...Flustered, he lowered his head and tried to start running away, but it seemed the crash was a bigger deal than he’d initially thought. In a corner of the hallway, a petite girl was crouched down. It seemed Kouta had sent her flying with the force of the collision, sending her tumbling to the ground. Surprised, he tried going over to her.

“Ah!”

...*Squish*. He felt something below his foot—probably what that girl had been holding. It was a sandwich, its toppings strewn through the hallway. He’d stepped on just one part of it. But Takasu was drawing closer, and the girl was still crouching. He didn’t have time to spare for bread. At any rate, he could at least help the girl. He extended his arm. “Are you ok...?”

His words were stolen from him.

Her small body was enveloped by her long, doll-like hair. She quietly brought up her face and turned her gaze to Kouta.

Her ivory profile looked almost transparent.

Her wondrous eyes glittered as though reflecting the color of the cosmos itself.

Her small, rosebud lips were open.

Through a gap in her disheveled hair, he caught a glance of an intensely bewitching face. For a moment, he nearly even forgot to breathe.

“...Wh...whoa.”

It struck him with all the force of a lightning bolt to the head. Kouta instantly forgot whatever destiny might soon befall him. Instead he was drawn into those entrancing eyes. Going into those eyes was a dangerous act, like jumping naked into a starlit sky—so captivated was he that he lost all track of his surroundings. He didn’t know anything—he didn’t know why the nearby second-year students had frozen, or why they had collectively swallowed their breaths.

He only knew about the beauty before his eyes.

“Run!”

“...Huh?!”

It was Takasu.

At some point, the delinquent Takasu had approached and jumped in front of him. He was blocking the girl with his body, as though to hide her away. He had the most terrifying look in the world on his face...

“Hurry! If you value your life, you need to go *now*!”

“...Huh?”

Takasu was shouting. He shooed Kouta away with a move of one hand. “Don’t just stand there! Go!”

“Y-yes sir!”

It was undoubtedly a threat. Still not quite understanding what was happening, Kouta couldn't resist Takasu's command. He could only run, leaving the girl behind.

Basically, the girl had been taken captive.

Looking back on how things had unfolded, Kouta came to that conclusion. She had been forcibly caged like a bird by that delinquent Takasu. Did his reign of terror know no bounds? He didn't know about the details, but it was surely something like that.

"...I wish I could help her."

Haaah... He loosed a heartfelt sigh, there in the post-school-day student council room.

Two people's gazes turned sideways to watch Kouta, not too quick, not too slow. It was like they stared straight through him.

"As expected from Kouta." The one who muttered that with such strange admiration was Sumire.

Beside her, arms folded, was Kitamura. He chimed in, too. "You seem to naturally head toward misfortune. You rush towards it like it's drawing you in... maybe sometimes it's in a slightly different direction from what we expect, but it's like you're always running blindly into bad luck."

Yes, yes. The other members agreed, too. A strange kind of solidarity was born in the cramped room.

"...Well, please, go right ahead. You can say whatever's on your mind about me." Being excluded from the conversation by his upperclassmen, Kouta turned to show them the back of his head.

To put it bluntly, Kouta wasn't afraid of bad luck at that moment. On the contrary, Kouta would put himself in the way of any misfortune if he could help that beautiful, second-year girl. He would suffer any bad luck, he thought, if it was for her—in short, he was smitten.

Even now, he deeply regretted having left the girl in that place. He was willing

to face the misfortune of putting himself on that delinquent's radar—no, he was willing to have a full on confrontation with him. If he could endure a little pain to achieve the best-case scenario, his true happy ending would be waiting for him, after all.

“President, I'll do it.” Kouta abruptly lifted his face and looked firmly into Sumire's apricot eyes. Sumire was brought to silence for a moment, but after a while, she slowly shook her head.

“Don't. Don't get eager. Don't do anything unnecessary. I just felt a chill run through me... now that I have a thorough understanding of your unlucky predisposition, I'm starting to think you should limit your mobility to a restricted area.”

“No! I'm going to do it. I'll definitely follow through. I'll go and save that poor prisoner. And then, I'll touch the Palmtop Tiger and be blessed! We'll touch it together, so that we can be blessed together... after all, you were the one who told me to do this in the first place, president.”

“...Well, I don't remember saying a single word telling you to save that poor soul.”

But Kouta was lost in a daydream, too far gone to listen to anyone else. He was recalling that white profile. Those misty, starry eyes. The expression that looked as though it were spun out of delicate glass. Like a fairy, she had a soft outline. There wasn't anyone else like her in the whole world.

“Umm. Kouta, you know, I'd like you to listen for a sec.”

“Please leave it be.”

He didn't even turn away from Kitamura's voice as it tried to break his warm fantasy. Kouta was immersed—he was a resident of the world of dreams. His mind was wrapped vividly in the vision of him, that person, and the Palmtop Tiger, the fortunate trinity.

“Ahh, it's fine. It's fine, Kitamura, please just leave it be. It's come to this, so please let it go wherever it leads.”

Even Sumire's blunt voice didn't reach Kouta's ears.

“Kouta said he wants us to leave it alone, and he’s at the point where he’s refused to listen to our advice, too. Let’s just let him do the best he can.”

“...Are you sure? Well...I guess it’ll be fine.”

Th-there!

Kouta resisted the urge to exclaim out loud. For a little while now, he had been passing by the front of second-year class C in order to avoid standing out. He’d done it several times now, coming from both sides of the hallway. Casually peeking in through the window, he finally found the person he was looking for. He was lucky he hadn’t been caught by Kushieda or Takasu.

He hid himself along the corner of the wall and ruminated over his fleeting glance at her. Even though it was break time, she was alone in her seat and not talking to anyone. Her small shoulders shook from the loneliness, like a fragrant rose. *She doesn’t have friends, either... just like me*, Kouta thought for a moment, but then immediately shook his head.

It was definitely that jealous Takasu—he must have forbidden her from letting anyone get too close. He’d threatened her; there was no mistaking it. That Takasu. Just how small could his heart be?

“...Just hold out a little longer. I’ll get the Palmtop Tiger soon and come for you,” he muttered in a small voice. Once again, trying to act as casually as possible, he started walking down the hallway. He put his hands in his pockets and grasped the present he had gotten for her in the palm of his hand. He had just bought it—a still-hot can of coffee.

It would have been best if he could give it to her by hand, but they didn’t have that kind of relationship yet. So, for now, it would be from an anonymous benefactor.

“...There!”

Go! He released the hot can of coffee with miraculous skill from his spot near the window, aiming at his beloved girl. The scene playing out in his head was: “Here, drink it!” “Huh?” *Shoot! Tumble tumble tumble...bop!* “It... it’s warm...” and then she’d squeeze the can between her hands... Just like in his vision, the

can traced a pretty line as it tumbled through the air directly toward her head. After he watched it go that far, he dashed away.

WHAM, came a sound from behind Kouta, but he was in a delirium as he ran. He didn't even notice, let alone stop. Even Kouta himself didn't believe he could have made such a brazen move. He couldn't believe someone shy like him could do something so pompous that it might as well have been from a TV drama. *Ahhh*, he sighed. Now that he knew this love, he was becoming more and more of a man. He held his flushing cheeks in his hands, smiling slightly as he ran away.

The hot can of coffee had a deep meaning to Kouta. *Sometime I'll give you something warmer... something even more heartwarming as a present, okay?* That was right. In other words, what he would give her was daily bliss. He meant to release her from Takasu.

With things going like this, the day when he and his rescued damsel would touch the Palmtop Tiger wasn't far. Hand in hand, with their cheeks touching, they would take the image of the palmtop-sized tiger—or whatever it was—and would caress it together. "Let's be blessed together ♥" he would say. "Yeah ♥," she would say back.

"...I can't believe it. I'm finally going to have some luck coming my way."

Kouta shivered in delight.

"Tsk."

He was soon shivering for an entirely different reason. The two oscillations canceled each other out then and there, after school. He had been passing time alone in the student council room like always, and when he finally thought of going home, he saw something in front of the shoe racks.

Kouta found a methodically folded loose-leaf sheet of paper nestled in his shoe cubby. It seemed to be addressed to him. Wondering what it might be for, he opened it. His heart suddenly froze.

On the note, written in scrawled letters, was just one phrase.

Careful on your way home tonight.

—Takasu, second year-C

Someone spoke. “Oh?”

“Wah!”

Kouta jumped at the voice, but instead of standing, he backed into the shoe racks, producing a loud racket.

“Wh-what is it?! Sh-shouldn’t you be at your club?!”

“I have today off.”

Despite Kouta’s rude tone, Kitamura’s gentle smile was unwavering. He glanced at the paper in Kouta’s hand. “Did you get a warning from Takasu? He sure goes out of his way,” he muttered, as though it were a joke.

“It’s not the time for that! Basically, th-this is...this is *bad*, right?”

“It basically says something like be careful going home tonight, right? Takasu’s a kind guy, giving a warning like this to an underclassman he doesn’t even know.”

Kouta didn’t even have the strength to respond to Kitamura’s incredible optimism. *Careful on your way home at night* was pretty much a stock threat from the mafia, wasn’t it? *If you get up to anything strange, it won’t be tolerated, be prepared*, was what it meant.

“Yeah...”

Chills ran down his spine. Although he had been prepared to fight Takasu for her, now that it came to this, he remembered those glinting, dangerous eyes, and couldn’t stop his whole body from shaking.

For a guy with crazy eyes like that, a surprise attack on an innocent underclassman would be as easy as breathing. He would definitely brandish a polished wooden sword or something like that and wave it around, aiming to take Kouta’s life.

“Well then, see ya tomorrow.”

Leaving Kouta scared and alone, Kitamura heartlessly went ahead out of the

school building. Reflexively, Kouta tried to stop Kitamura. "...Wait!"

He clenched his extended hand into a fist.

In his heart was the girl's fragile profile. He had decided to save her from her own misfortune, hadn't he? Then he couldn't get scared by every little thing, especially not by something as small as Takasu's threat. He couldn't ask Kitamura for help.

He would school himself to extreme patience. He'd toughen up. Kouta crumpled up the paper after a single breath, and then, without taking a good look at his surroundings, tossed it toward where the waste basket should have been.

"Wahaha, it's all good! I just threw it away!"

"You seem to be having fun."

He turned towards the bitter voice. A little ways away, he saw Sumire.

"President, what are you doing?"

"I got an earful of your talk just now."

On top of her head was a single piece of crumpled paper, sitting in place because of her amazing balance. Sumire frowned as she furrowed her brow.

"If this were a pebble or something else, my temple would have gone up in a fountain of blood and I'd have suffered an unsightly death."

"Ahh... and if it were a plate, you would've turned into a kappa."

After vaguely nodding, Kouta finally grasped the situation. *The thing on top of Sumire's head is the trash I just tried to throw away.*

"...President, you're pretty unlucky, yourself. Normally, a paper has no business staying put like that."

I'm very sorry. He went over to Sumire, took the paper off her head, held it up, and this time tried to get it into the waste bin. But suddenly he burst into laughter.

"Hahaha, what you looked like a second ago...ahaha, it was like this!"

He'd won out against Takasu's threat. That feeling manifested in Kouta as a

kind of strange elation. He plopped the paper onto his head and turned himself back towards Sumire. It was a pretty boneheaded reproduction, but he still couldn't stop laughing.

Sumire's expression didn't change. She just watched Kouta the whole time.

He had just enough self-awareness to think *Ah, this isn't good*, but then he kept right on going. "You're eighteen, hahahaha, but you had trash on your head!"

The fit of laughter made his body shake so much that the trash began to fall, grazing the tip of his nose on its way down, but he couldn't stop.

"Hahahahaha, ahahaha, haha...haaa!"

He finally took a breath. The fit had gone on for a full minute. He bent and picked up the trash and again threw it into the waste basket. Then, he wiped the sweat that had formed on his brow from having laughed too hard.

"Well, then, see you." He turned his back to Sumire and tried to start walking home.

"Kouta."

The one who firmly grabbed his shoulder was Sumire.

"What is it?"

A grin. The smiling, living Japanese doll dropped a key into Kouta's hand.

"This is the key to the student council room. Just now, I was on my way to return it to the vice-principal's office, but I forgot a very important matter. There's a locker, right? Inside it are nearly one hundred historical logs of student council activities. We need to put a printed sticker on each one to label those activities by fiscal year. We need stickers on the front cover, stickers on the back cover, and we need to organize them to be easy to see. Today. I leave this up to you, General-Affairs-kun."

"...What? *Right now?* All by myself?"

"That's right. I'll check it tomorrow morning, and if they're not all done... You understand, right? Well then, get to work."

“But that’s impossible.”

“Try your best.”

He could see the word “anger” glinting inside her double lidded, beautiful eyes. Sumire waved a white hand at him on her way out.

It took him over three hours before he finally finished the work he’d been ordered to do.

By then, the sun had decisively gone down, and it was already evening. He left the school gates and crossed the large street. It was well into the evening around the time he headed out, and the neighborhood streets were devoid of people.

Kouta busied himself with hustling down the asphalt road, its length illuminated by the streetlamps. *Careful on your way home tonight*—the gloomy road randomly reminded him of that brief message.

This isn’t something to be scared about, he’d sworn to himself. He’d resolved to look straight ahead, but when he was actually walking down a road at night, he couldn’t help but worry about his surroundings. Was it always this quiet? He didn’t sense the presence of any people in front of him or behind him at all.

In spite of himself, he was close to freezing up on the spot.

“...No. I haven’t really done anything yet,” he muttered to himself in a small voice, and to overcome his unease, he lifted his face in determination. That’s right, there was nothing to worry about. There wasn’t any reason to fear. He really had been threatened, but he hadn’t done anything since then...but...

“Uwah!”

...A bush rustled. Nearly scared to death, Kouta leapt to the side. He tried making an immediate break for it to run away, but...

“Mrrroww.”

...He heard a faint mewl.

“Oh...oh, it’s just a cat.”

As though lost in the shadows, the pitch black kitten poked its head out from the bush. Only its cute, tiptoeing front feet were white, like it was wearing socks.

Looking up at Kouta's face as he caught his breath, the cat mewled at him one more time to curry his favor. Then it stuck its tail straight up into the air and edged up to him on its tiny booted legs.

It was so adorable that Kouta forgot his fears. His eyes lit up in delight. When he put out his fingers and called to the kitten, it pressed its head happily against his ankles.

"Ah, stop, stop, you'll get fur on me... oh, right."

He remembered that he still had the leftover tail of a fried mackerel inside his bento box. Kouta crouched then and there and took out the bento box from his bag. While dodging the kitten's playful pawing, he took off the box's band and top, and picked up the tail with the tips of his fingers.

It would be bad if he got fur on his uniform, and he couldn't just horse around here for long. So, as a parting gift, he thought of throwing the tail into the bush the kitten had come from. The kitten would probably go back trying to chase it, so he'd just leave it at that and go home.

"Right—here, here, I'll give it to you now. There!"

He threw it diagonally in front of him—or he tried to. But the golden eyes of the kitten were looking past Kouta. The tail flew perfectly out of his hand and straight behind him.

Oh no, Kouta muttered, but the kitten ignored him and ran off after it.

"Mrrawr...!" Suddenly, all the hair on the kitten's body stood on end. It reached Kouta's knee, raised fur puffing it up to three times its original size. It arched its back, lowered its ears, and stepped backwards, trembling. Then, like a bouncing ball, it jumped into the bush.

"Huh? You don't want it?"

I wonder what happened? He stood up and turned around to retrieve the thrown fish tail.

“...”

He lost his voice.

There stood the girl.

There stood that person—his beloved—the half-eaten tail stuck, stunningly, between her eyes.

“...Tomiie...Kouta...”

Like a low, low growl, her horribly monotone voice seemed to crawl along the ground. He knew immediately he should apologize—but this sudden meeting scattered his thoughts off into the night. He couldn’t even ask her how she knew his name.

That girl’s eyes. That gaze.

“You know...I was thinking of forgiving you.”

From within an obscure corner of his head, numbed by panic, Kouta thought...
That’s weird.

That long hair, beautiful face, and the delicate body—it was unmistakably that girl. It was the one with his undying love—the prisoner. But why did it feel so weird?

“It didn’t seem like you bumped into me or stepped on my sandwich on purpose...and you’re also Kitamura-kun’s kouhai. I was thinking of forgiving you, which is rare and generous for me.”

When he looked at the sweet spring breeze of a girl that he’d encountered in that nighttime street, he thought for a moment that she was shaking.

“Ah, ah, ah, ah...?”

So why was it that *he* couldn’t stop shaking, now that he was facing her?

“And then when you hit me in the head with that coffee, I thought I could just tolerate it and hold myself back. That was because Kitamura-kun apologized. He said to just let it go. Now that I think about it, it seems like Kitamura-kun was too easy on you...and *I* was too easy on you, too.”

The girl’s shadow wavered and lengthened.



Kouta's whole body froze, and he took an unconscious step back.

Her eyes were like a cave painted black with darkness.

Kouta, no longer able to even breathe, tried desperately to understand the situation. "Uhhh...huh? H-huh?"

"Takasu Ryuuji also tried to stop me. 'He's a new student, so don't do anything terrible,' he said. So me being here was a total coincidence. This art exercise I was doing went on forever, so I was late going home...and you happened to be walking ahead of me."

"Th-that's strange," Kouta muttered in a feeble monologue. "When I just turned around there wasn't anyone there... oh, maybe... right, she's so small I didn't notice...?"

He meant to speak just to himself, but it seemed that his words had also reached the ears of that petite girl. He saw her white cheeks grow tense. That didn't bode well...

"Right. Uh, yeah...that's right."

The girl slowly peeled off the tail that had been stuck skillfully between her eyes. She looked at it just for a moment, and then, as she exhaled, her lips distorted into a smile. "Hrmph!"

Splitch! She hurled it towards Kouta's feet with a terrific force. Struck silent, he leapt back. The tail gouged the asphalt like a bullet. The sock-wearing kitten stared at it from within the bush and tried to quietly reach out its front paw...

"Tomiie...Kouta..."

He shook at that delicate voice, its sound like a poisonous harp being strummed in hell.

"Even an incredibly generous person like me has limits to how much she can take." Without a sound, she lifted her face. Her eyes bore straight through Kouta.

"...Eek..."

His feet became tangled.

He fell to his butt.

The eyes of the person who looked down at him were dyed in madness—the color of bloodlust.

The glinting eyes emitted the scent of blood. It was the mad gleam of a starved animal. They said one thing. “There’s my prey.” If that beast could bite him—kill him—then it would eat him. It would cut through his flesh and feast on his guts. That ferocious, growling voice matched her gruesome smile.

“I won’t forgive you...”

Her mouth, bursting with the color of blood, was just like that of a raging tiger.

“Huh...? T-tiger...? Uh...”

Terrifying, ferocious... tiny... palm-sized...?

“...the Palmtop...Tiger...?”

At that precise moment, his thoughts went blank.

A young man’s shriek echoed throughout the neighborhood, until finally, it faded away.

It was seven-fifteen in the morning.

There was no sign of the other students yet. Kouta was unseen as he went to the hatchway of the second year’s shoe rack.

Second year class C, the girls’ shoe rack, at the very top, the one furthest to the left.

Holding the paper bag with both his hands, he tried to stick it in just as he’d been commanded. But he couldn’t get it to fit, so he tried smoothing it out, as though he were refolding an umbrella.

A tomato, bacon, and cheese sandwich, which was the most popular option at the sandwich shop called “Maruya” near the north station entrance, a joint that sold ten limited edition sandwich boxes. A glaze-baked chicken sandwich was the second most popular item. Then the silky and genuine custard and café-au-

lait-flavored puddings that were only sold at the local convenience store. A three-pack of vanilla bean yogurt. One-liter-sized milk carton.

He knew there shouldn't have been a mistake in the contents. He'd checked them like his life depended on it.

He once again pushed in the more-or-less compact bag, and this time his offering was neatly finished. Finally, he checked the position of the cubby one more time, and the nametag...

"Ha...hahaha..."

...and then he fell right down onto his knees. The girl really was the legendary Palmtop Tiger in the flesh. After all, her name was Aisaka Taiga. Taiga... the palmtop-sized Taiga-san.

"...Just who thought up this stupid nickname...?"

He lost his strength to laugh and squatted under the Palmtop Tiger's shoe cubby. The specific variety of things he had left in dedication were the items she'd requested as an apology.

"Huh? Kouta, what are you doing here at this time...?"

He turned to the voice that came from behind him.

"...Buh!" He looked up vacantly at Kitamura, who let out a spurt of laughter.

"Y-you... that face! Did Aisaka do you in?!"

"See for yourself... senpai, what are you here for? Is it club stuff?"

"Yeah, it's for my cl-club...ha....ha!"

"Bwahahahaha," he guffawed at Kouta, so hard he was letting his spit fly. Kouta didn't have the strength to respond. For now, and for a while, he'd have this face, and he'd have to live with it.

The other night, after thoroughly having her way pushing him around, with Kouta still completely under her control, the Palmtop Taiga had said, "A naive idiot like you needs the power of feng shui to live!"

Thus, Kouta's face. With his nose as the center, it had a compass drawn on it in bold sharpie. His chin was north, with seven more lines for all the directions.

She had drawn the arrows in freehand, styled like a Feng Shui compass. Whether he rubbed or washed it, it was a compass designed to find true bliss—and it wouldn't disappear.

"It was a reaaaaaaally terrible experience. She really is a tiger. A wild animal that no one should touch. She's a dangerous person, so dangerous that she was infamous enough to have a legend about her... and, senpai, you knew all of that, and you still spurred me on."

"We didn't intend for that to happen. That's why I tried to tell you, but you told me to just leave it be, didn't you? And then the president also said to leave it alone."

"Would you agree to do anything if it was the president who told you to?"

Well, for the most part, yes. Kitamura uh-huhed and nodded, expression perfectly normal.

"Bwahahaha!" Another burst of laughter. "But still, your face! It's like a big scrunchy buttthole!"

"I-If you want to laugh, go ahead... I was the stupid one for taking your and the president's words seriously. Anyway, I know the Palmtop Tiger's actual identity, but who were those people? Kushieda-senpai and..."

"Kushieda, even though she looks like that, is Taiga's best friend."

"F-friend?! Those two together! Friends! That's a shocking development, is what that is. Then is that scary Takasu-senpai the Palmtop Tiger's... is he her friend, too? I-is he her... boyfriend?"

When he asked that, Kitamura suddenly withdrew his smile. "Do you really want to know? Unfortunately, even I can't answer that. The relationship those two have is one of the seven wonders of the school, after all."

"What? Ahh, forget it!"

In the end, he had just been toyed with by the student council members. They were just teasing him. He understood that well enough.

In indignation, Kouta turned his back to Kitamura and started running. *My face is a butt now, anyway. I'm just predisposed to being unlucky, anyway!*

“Ah, Kouta! Wait!”

Like I’m going to turn around. He completely ignored Kitamura’s voice and just kept running.

“The Palmtop Tiger touched you, right?! How is it—do you feel like you’ve been blessed with happiness?!”

“—Tch!”

Without a word, he went up the stairs and cut off that question. He at least didn’t want to answer in the negative. Oh, that was right—he really had touched the Palmtop Tiger. She had sat on top of him, and he had been trying to push back the sharpie she’d tried to force on his face, and really put up a desperate fight. But then he had completely lost the battle of strength. He couldn’t put up any resistance against that tiny girl at all.

Just what’s with that girl? It seemed like he only ever got strange people appearing around him. Shaking off frustrated tears, the unlucky Kouta ran down the hallway. At its end, he jumped into what should have been an empty classroom.

“Ah...”

Panicked, he covered his face with his hands. But, it seemed it was too late.

Several of his classmates, who were at school early for some reason, looked up at his face with sounds of surprise.

And of course they would. If a compass-faced boy suddenly appeared, anyone would be surprised. Kouta, halfway to despair, walked to his seat with his graffiti-covered face completely exposed. Now he would be even more out of place in this class... Then...

“Wahahahaha! Tomiie, what happened to your face?!”

“Let us see, let us see, what were you doing?!”

...The bright sounds of laughter suddenly surrounded Kouta. His classmates approached him with outstretched fingers and roughly—though not enough to hurt him—rubbed at Kouta’s cheeks.

“Ah, that’s, this is—”

“Huh, what’s that? What happened?”

“Say it, come on, out with it! How did you get like this?!”

Kouta’s desk was surrounded. They were waiting with sparkling eyes for Kouta to talk. They were pretty much saying, *just what did you get yourself involved in?! What could have possibly landed you in a stupid situation like this?*

“Well, it’s like this...”

Kouta faced the people who were leaning over him and started briskly chatting away. He started at the very beginning. They thought the story was way cooler than he thought they would. The further along he got in his retelling, the more the interjections increased. “Whoa!” “You serious?!” “Wow!”

Kouta had truly confronted the legendary Palmtop Tiger, after all.

He had even touched her.

He was on the third floor of the old school building.

“See you again tomorrow!”

“Yeah, see you!”

Noisily separating from his classmates, Kouta quickly walked down the hallway.

He’d just been thinking, *maybe it’s time to quit General Affairs*. But at present, his feet were taking him straight to the student council room. He thought he might continue for a little longer. He had things he wanted to say to those spiteful upperclassmen.

I touched the Palmtop Tiger, he would say.

And actually, some nice things happened, too, he would say.

Anyway, even if he told them about the good things, Sumire would say, “You mean *trivial* things happened.” She’d probably laugh, but...he was so happy! After entering school late this last month, he’d finally had found people to talk to. He was so happy he almost wanted to believe in the Palmtop Tiger’s blessing. Just today, he felt he’d laughed about three times as much as he had

in the month before.

So, with eyes a little brighter than normal, he pushed open the familiar door. He kind of felt like he was starting a new life, and he expected nothing less.

“Sorry I’m late... uwah!”

In that instant, his eyes were hit by the flash of a glaring light, and he turned his face away, flustered. What was that just now...?

“F-flash?!”

“Correct! One more for posterity!”

Just as he barely opened his eyes, Sumire flashed him again from the opposite side of the room with her digital camera. Behind her, hard at work as usual, were the second-year duo of the secretary and manager of General Affairs.

“Well done, president!”

Next to Sumire stood Kitamura, applauding.

“Wh...what are you doing?!”

“I heard about your face, so I wanted to preserve the memory. ...Yeah, but really, just...bwahaha! That face!”

Daahahahahahaha! Naahahahahahaha!

The laughter that rang out from the student body president was two times manlier than usual. *Of course it would end up like this*, just before Kouta lost his nerve...

“Ah, I had a good laugh! See, I’ve got a picture to remember it now, so hurry up and wipe that off!” Sumire threw a small tube to Kouta while wiping away her tears.

“What is this?”

“It’s supposed to be the best makeup remover on the market. At any rate, the stuff can supposedly be used to take off nail polish. If this doesn’t work then you’ll have to go to a dermatologist. Here, take this too.”

She also threw a towel at him, and Kouta was pushed forward from his back. Normally he would just say “yes, yes, I got it” in a scene like this, but...

“...President.”

“What?”

He turned around and said it. “You’re a kind person, aren’t you?”

Suddenly Sumire’s eyes went round. Those lips forgot their next sentence and opened slightly—and Kouta just left the room. While walking down the hallway, he subtly pumped his face.

“I won...!”

For Sumire to make that face...yes, it was the first time he had confused that ‘tough guy’ and silenced her. He’d left her at a loss for words.

For some reason, he was in bit of a good mood. He was still the compass-faced boy, but today of all days, things were going very smoothly for him. After touching the Palmtop Tiger, he may really have gotten luck on his side.

It might have been because of that thought, but he didn’t resent the Palmtop Tiger for putting him through this. Though, of course, he *was* scared of her. He definitely didn’t want to come across her a second time.

“Well, a beauty is still a beauty, after all’s said and done.”

He’d seen the Palmtop Tiger up close. Even though she was terrifying, she was still a beautiful girl of the highest caliber. He felt he could kind of understand why all his upperclassmen called her by that name. *She’s scary—you don’t want to get involved with her, you don’t want to make her angry, but you can’t just be afraid and ignore her.*

Since we can’t ignore her, let’s all look at the pretty girl from a distance and equal footing—from this safety zone. Anyone who went out of the safety zone and approached her would be attacked. In his misfortune, Kouta had unwittingly taken one step too far. And the result of that was his punishment as the compass-faced boy.

So then, now that he understood everything, what was Kouta to do?

He decided to stay in the safety zone.

He decided that no matter how unlucky he might be, no matter what kind of situation he might find himself in, he would stay at a distance from the Palmtop

Tiger. He'd stay where he couldn't make her any angrier and just continue to secretly watch her. *The cozy safety zone doesn't seem so bad.* With those complex thoughts in mind, he would finally start his high school life.

Humming to match his mood, Kouta went to the hallway restroom and threw the window open wide, full of resolve. His enthusiasm was his undoing.

"Oh no!"

He'd dropped the tube he'd gotten from Sumire outside. Flustered, he leaned forward, looked down, and froze. Of course it would end up like this. Regardless of whether he had taken refuge in the safety zone, his bad luck could easily overcome such a small roadblock.

"Ow, owow, owowow..."

She was under the open window.

With a look like a demon, she clutched her head. With the small tube in hand, the girl slowly looking up at him was...

The Palmtop Tiger.

END

Afterword

I've become smooth and fat—it is I, the letter Y. My favorite phrase is: “Then let's settle this with sumo!” What I want is a sumo wrestling ring. It'd be a fine pretense to hone my deadly technique. What do you think of my stable balance...? I've got your attention now, right? ...The fastest one always wins, you hear me? (This is a message to anyone out there with ties to a sumo stable.) Well then, to all those of you who took *Toradora* 2 in hand, I thank you sincerely! I'd say this second volume has a more brutal feel to it, but did you enjoy it? Please do join me again for the next volume, I kindly beg of you! If it gives you pleasure even for a short while, I will even sell what's most important to me as a woman (the youth of my skin) to the romcom devil! I'd even throw in *this* in the bargain! (Yup, there goes my estrogen...) And now, as I think some of you may already know, my series *Our Dear Tamura-kun* has become a manga with *Monthly Dengeki Comic Gao!* I'm looking forward to seeing what Tamura and the gang will look like in their first outing as manga characters. I'll leave the fate of the Tamura-kun and *Toradora!* manga in your hands.

Well then. As always, I've got tarako spaghetti mania. Its extraordinary deliciousness never fails to give me the shakes... it's so tasty, it's obscene. And in addition to that, what really packed the pounds onto me this winter was the jewel of the meat bun world, the climax of flavor—the pork bun. Well...actually, um, it wasn't really pork buns so much as pork ramen (as in both the ramen *and* pork buns). I'd have two bowls in a single day, or sometimes even three. It got to the point where it'd be strange if I *hadn't* gotten fat.

Nonetheless, I didn't just do nothing about it. I gave in and tried that thing. That “diet” thing that people talk so much about. Specifically, it was a low-carb diet. I had a menu prepared for a full week, but after a single day of it, all I could think about was rice. The inside of my mind was all about rice. That white and chewy yummy rice that I'm one hundred percent all about. I got a phone call from Mr. Manager about work, but I couldn't think! I couldn't manage any good replies. I was so hungry I cried a little. I called my parents' house to talk to my mom...because I wanted to hear her voice...

So then, well, uh, I stopped. Mr. Manager also said, “This affects your work, so please stop,” so I won’t ever do a low-carb diet again. I don’t want to cry those bitter tears ever again! And then I retested my romance for my favorite combo of ingredients—boiled water and raw rice... ah, what was that?! Romance, combo... Romcom?

...After thinking up something like that, maybe I should shave my head in apology...

So then, thank you for staying with me up to here, all of you readers! Once again, I really, truly am thankful. I love you so much that I’d even introduce you to my parents. If you had even a little fun, I’m incredibly happy. And Yasu-sensei and Manager-sama—thank you for taking care of me. Like prayers to the holy trinity, I send you my very best regards. And also, this time around, thank you for finding time in your busy schedule to comment on my belt, Nasu Kinoko-sensei. If it’s Nasu-sensei, I don’t mind being seen in the full regalia passed down through the generations of the Takemiya household (replete with hair bun)...

—Takemiya Yuyuko



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